NATION

Manipur Police lay down arms

>> Page: 4 <<

BUSINESS

No. of ultra-rich in India rose by 6% last year to 13K: Report

>> Page: 7 <<

SPORTS

Rahul is still feeling sore while batting in the nets

>> Page: 8 <<

www.twitter.com/EnglishSalar
www.facebook.com/EnglishSalar
www.instagram.com/dailysalarenglish
youtube.com/@dailysalardigital

SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈہ بنگلور

Website: https://salar.news www.magzter.com 29 FEBRUARY 2024 | THURSDAY | BENGALURU | 19 SHABAN, 1445 AH Vol 4 | Issue No 43| Pages: 8

SHIVAKUMAR FIREFIGHTS FOR CONGRESS IN HIMACHAL

●Himachal CM denies rumours of him quitting ●Minister Vikramaditya quits, then makes a U-turn ●Speaker supends 15 BJP MLAs

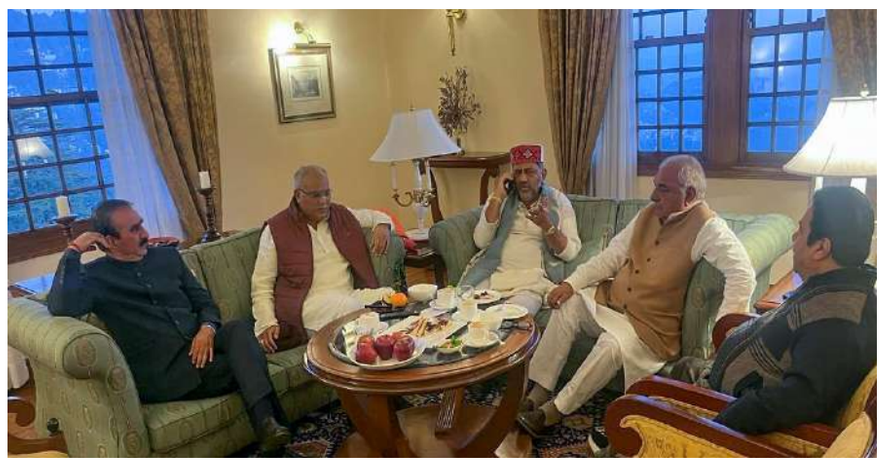
SHIMLA/NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Congress scrambled on Wednesday to save its government in Himachal Pradesh, amid dramatic developments that included suspension of 15 BJP MLAs by the Speaker and a resignation offer by high-profile minister Vikramaditya Singh.

From Delhi, the Congress mounted a damage control exercise to stop the possible loss of a party-ruled state just weeks ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge despatched three observers -- Bhupesh Baghel, Bhupinder Singh Hooda and D K Shivakumar -- to Shimla, and the party indicated that it could take some "tough steps".

Singh, who is the son of Himachal Congress president Pratibha Singh, said in the morning that he is submitting his resignation from council of ministers but hours later softened his stand.

After a meeting with central observers, who were rushed by the party to Shimla, Singh cited Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu's "rejection" of his "offer" to resign and the need for unity in the party. In view of this, he told reporters, he is not "pressing" for it.



Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu with Bhupesh Baghel, DK Shivakumar, Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Rajeev Shukla during a meeting, in Shimla on Wednesday **PHOTO: ANI**

He also claimed then that the government was never in crisis. The turbulence in Himachal was triggered by Tuesday's cross-voting by six Congress MLAs in the Rajya Sabha election for the lone seat from Himachal Pradesh. The party has now sought the disqualification of these MLAs from the Assembly. The matter was heard by Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania who has reserved his order.

The suspended BJP MLAs, who include the leader of the opposition Jai Ram Thakur, initially refused to leave the House -- in an apparent bid to stall the Assembly from passing the Sukhu government's Budget through voice vote.

BJP wanted voting on the Budget, which they felt would reveal that Congress has lost its majority in the Assembly.

But in the afternoon, the crisis was staved off for the time being as the House passed the Finance Bill by voice vote with no BJP member being present.

The Speaker then adjourned the session sine die.

Sukhu dismissed speculation that he was resigning.

He said Congress government will complete its five-year term in the state.

Congress stalwart Abhishek Manu Singhvi was defeated by BJP's Harsh Mahajan Tuesday through a draw of lots, after the two candidates bagged 34 votes each.

The result meant that Congress which had stormed into power in the state just 14 months back, winning 40 seats in the Assembly, had failed to reach the halfway mark.

Budget was still pending passage and the possibility of the opposition BJP bringing a no-confidence motion loomed large.

BJP won 25 seats in the House of 68 in 2022, and there are three independent MLAs, who were believed to be with the ruling Congress till the cross-voting crisis erupted. Leader of Opposition Jai Ram Thakur took a delegation to Raj Bhavan around 7.30 am Wednesday, asking Governor Shiv Pratap Shukla to ensure that the Finance Bill was passed only through a division.

In the evening, the observers began their interaction with party MLAs.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said Kharge has asked the observers and AICC in-charge for the state Rajeev Shukla to speak to all MLAs, including those who are disgruntled.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Harshwardhan Chauhan moved a motion seeking their suspension of BJP MLAs for allegedly disrespecting the Speaker.

The motion was adopted by voice vote, and the Speaker axed 15 MLAs. The BJP members, however, refused to leave. The Speaker then adjourned the House till 12 pm. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

K'taka to provide free sanitary pads to school girls

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

Chief Minister of Karnataka Siddaramiah has re-launched the distribution of sanitary pads to school girls under Shuchi Scheme, allocating a budget of Rs 4,700 lakhs per annum. Nearly 1,90,00,000 students from 6th to 12th standard, as well as adolescent girls in hostels under the Department of Social Welfare and Minority Welfare Department, will benefit from this initiative. Each Shuchi kit contains 8-month supply of sanitary pads. Approximately 2.20 crore sanitary packets are provided annually, with each child receiving 12 packets per year. ***—Salar News***

Santhan, convict acquitted in Rajiv's assassination, dead

CHENNAI, 28 FEB

Santhan, one of the seven released convicts in Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, passed away at Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital in Chennai, on Wednesday. Santhan, a Sri Lankan national, was released from central prison at Vellore along with five other convicts in November 2022 following Supreme Court's decision after spending over 32 years in prison. The assassins of Rajiv were set free on the grounds of having good conduct in jail. ***—ANI***

>>>More on Page 4

'Entire stretch of Ganga in Bengal unfit for bathing'

NEW DELHI, 28 JAN

The entire stretch of Ganga in West Bengal contains high faecal coliform making the water unfit for bathing, National Green Tribunal has observed, warning the authorities concerned of imposing a fine unless there was progress in tackling the pollution. The tribunal underlined that 258.67 million liters per day (MLD) of untreated sewage was directly flowing into the river. NGT was hearing a matter involving prevention, control, and reduction of pollution of Ganga across each district and state through which the river or its tributaries flow. In an order passed on 21 February, the bench said, it was "surprising" that not even a single Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) was set up in some districts like Purba Medinipur. The panel directed District Ministers to file affidavits setting a deadline for achieving the target of 100 per cent treatment of sewage generated every day. ***—PTI***

Govt bans 2 factions of Muslim Conference in J&K

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

The government on Wednesday banned two factions of Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir for five years for their anti-India and pro-Pakistan propaganda, and asking people to refrain from taking part in elections. Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is determined to uproot terrorism, and anyone involved in unlawful activities will face direct consequences. On Tuesday, the government extended the ban imposed on Jamaat-e-Islami, Jammu Kashmir (JeI), by another five years for continuing activities that pose a threat to the security of the nation. Union Home Ministry said Muslim Conference Jammu and Kashmir- Sumji faction (MCJK-S), is known for its anti-India and pro-Pakistan propaganda. ***—PTI***

PM inaugurates projects worth Rs 17,300cr in TN

THOOTHUKUDI, 28 FEB

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday inaugurated and laid the foundation stone of multiple development projects worth about Rs 17,300 crore here and castigated the earlier UPA regime for not 'bothering' about Tamil Nadu's progress.

The state is writing a 'new chapter of progress,' and due to the Central government's efforts, modern connectivity in Tamil Nadu is 'on a new high', Modi said after inaugurating the projects.

In a veiled reference to the ruling DMK, he alleged that though newspapers and TV channels wanted to highlight Centre's such efforts "the regime here won't allow them to do so,"

DMK Lok Sabha MP, Kanimozhi and Tamil Nadu PWD Minister EV Velu were on the dais.

Launching India's first indigenous green hydrogen waterway vessel here, Modi said increasing connectivity due to the consistent efforts of the Central Government has enhanced 'ease of living' in Tamil Nadu. Development of maritime sector also means development of a state like Tamil Nadu.

On the mission to build 'Viksit Bharat', he said 'Viksit Tamil Nadu' has a great role to play in this endeavour.

After he laid the foundation stone for the outer harbour container terminal for VO Chidambaranar Port, the PM said an amount worth about Rs 7,000 crore will be invested in this project.

Modi also laid the foundation stone for a new launch complex of ISRO at Kulasekarapattinam near here, which is worth about Rs 986 crore and the facility is set to accomodate 24 launches per year.

—PTI

Narendra Modi being welcomed by ISRO Chairman S Somanath during a programme, in Thoothukudi, Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

K'taka to cut power tariff from 1 March

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

The Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission (KERC) on Wednesday announced a reduction in power tariffs effective from 1 March 2024. As per the new order, the consumers will see a reduction of 10 paise per unit.

However, this rule applies only to people consuming more than 100 units of electricity per month. For Low Tension (LT) domestic lighting consumers energy charges are reduced by 110 paise.

For High Tension (HT) commercial consumers will get a rebate of Rs 125 paise per unit. In the case of HT Hospital & Educational Institutions: Energy charges were reduced by 40 paise per unit; Demand Charges were reduced by Rs 10 per Kilo Vault Amperes. For HT residential apartments demand charges are reduced by Rs 10 per KVA.

Special Incentive Scheme is continued for the financial year 2024- 25, with a change in the rate of incentive from Rs 2 per unit to Re 1 per unit for night consumption. The other terms and conditions remain the same.

KERC has decided to encourage the use of electric vehicles and the nnergy charges for electric vehicle charging stations have been continued at a rate of Rs 4.50 per unit. In the new edition of the tariff hike, the urban and rural categories were merged into one category in the previous order. The rebate of 30p per unit is allowed only for LT commercial, Industries, pvt hospitals & educational institutions in village panchayat. *—Salar News*

NATIONAL SCIENCE DAY

Students visit the Open Day Science exhibition at Raman Research Institute in Bengaluru on Wednesday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Law panel may propose simultaneous polls in 2029

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Law Commission is likely to recommend adding a new chapter to the Constitution on 'one nation, one election' and holding the gigantic democratic exercise of simultaneous polls for Lok Sabha, state assemblies, and local bodies across the country by mid-2029, sources said on Wednesday.

The Commission, under Justice (retd) Ritu Raj Awasthi, would recommend an amendment to the Constitution to add a "new chapter or part" on simultaneous elections.

The panel would also recommend synchronising the terms of legislative assemblies in "three phases" in the next five years so that the first simultaneous polls could be held in May-June 2029 when elections for the 19th Lok Sabha are due.

The new chapter in the Constitution would include issues related to "simultaneous election", "sustainability of simultaneous elections" and "common electoral roll" for Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, panchayats, and municipalities so that the three-tier simultaneous polls could be held together "in one go", they explained.

The new chapter being recommended will have the power of non-extant" to override other provisions in the Constitution dealing with terms of assemblies.

In case a government falls due to no confidence or if there is a hung House, the Commission would recommend a constitution of a "unity government" with representatives from various political parties.

In case the unity government formula does not work, the law panel would recommend holding fresh elections for the remainder of the term of the House.

—PTI

Nita to head Disney, Reliance Rs 70K cr deal

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Walt Disney Co and Reliance Industries on Wednesday announced signing of binding pacts to merge their media operations in India to create a Rs 70,000 crore behemoth.

Reliance and its affiliates will hold a 63.16 per cent stake in the combined entity that will house two streaming services and 120 television channels.

Disney will hold the remaining 36.84 per cent stake, the companies said in a statement.

Reliance has also agreed to invest at closing Rs 11,500 crore into the joint venture to give it muscles to fight rivals such as Japan's Sony and Netflix.

Disney+Hotstar has seen its paid subscriber base decline from around 55 million to about 40 million in the first quarter of this financial year because of Reliance's Jio Cinemas winning exclusive rights for live sports.

The combined entity will have the largest OTT subscriber base and close to 120 channels in the country.

Media ventures of Reliance are currently housed in Network 18, which owns TV18 news channels as well as a plethora of entertainment (under the 'Colors' brand) and sports channels.

Disney+Hotstar was launched in India in 2020, post the acquisition of the entertainment assets of 21st Century Fox.

Nita Ambani, wife of billionaire and Reliance chairman Mukesh Ambani, will head the joint venture while Uday Shankar will be the vice chairperson. *—PTI*

TWO KILLED AS TRAIN HITS THEM IN JHARKHAND

JAMTARA, 28 FEB

At least two people were run over and killed by a train in Jharkhand's Jamtara district on Wednesday evening, police said.

Jamtara Sub-Divisional Police Officer told PTI that the accident took place near Kaljharia around 140 km from Jharkhand's capital Ranchi.

The incident occurred at 7 pm and only two persons were killed.

"Train no 12254 (Anga Express) passing between Vidyasagar-Kasitar stopped due to chain pulling at 7 pm. At 7.07 pm, two people who were walking on the track were run over on the up line by MEMU train, at least 2km away from where the train stopped", the Eastern Railway said. *—PTI*

5 FOREIGNERS HELD

3,300 kg drugs seized in Guj, biggest haul ever

PORBANDAR/NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Indian agencies Wednesday made their highest-ever narcotics bust from the sea as they seized 3,300 kg drugs, which sailed from an Iranian port, off the Gujarat coast and arrested five foreigners from a dhow.

The cache could be worth anything between Rs 1,300-Rs 2,000 crore in the international market, Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) Director General SN Pradhan said.

Home Minister Amit Shah called the joint operation by the Navy, NCB and the Gujarat Police a "historic success" and a testament of his government's "unwavering commitment to making our nation drug-free".

The unregistered fishing boat was intercepted on Tuesday morning at the Arabian Sea from a point about 60 nautical miles from the Indian coast and along the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL). About 3,300 kg of contraband that includes 3,110 kg charas or Hashish, 158.3 kg of crystalMethamphetamine and 24.6 kg of suspected heroin has been recovered from packets that bore the stamp of 'Ras Awad Goods Co, produce of Pakistan', the NCB said.

The source of the drugs is found to be the Chabahar Port in Iran **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

The source of the drugs is found to be the Chabahar Port in Iran, the agency said.

"This is the biggest offshore narcotics seizure made in the country till date. We have seen that drug smuggling has increased through the maritime route over the last few years and hence we are jointly working with other government agencies like the Navy, Coast Guard, Customs etc. to intercept such activities," Pradhan said.

"The smugglers and drug operators use the Arabian Sea to exploit the Indian coastline that is vulnerable. It is part of the grand design to destabilise the country using drugs," Pradhan said.

NCB said it has begun speaking to its foreign counterparts to probe the forward and backward linkages of this consignment.

The last big seizure from the high seas was of 2,500 kg by the NCB and the Navy off the Kerala coast in May, 2023. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

B'luru-Coimbatore Vande Bharat timing revised

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

South Western Railways have announced revised timings for Vande Bharat train between Bengaluru-Coimbatore from 11 March. The onward journey (Coimbatore-Bengaluru Cantonment) will start two hours and 25 minutes late. The train will depart Coimbatore at 7.25 am instead of 5 am. It will reach Bengaluru Cantonment station by 1.50 pm instead of 11.30 am. From Bengaluru, the train will start its journey at 2.20 pm instead of 11.30 am and will reach Coimbatore by 8.45 pm instead of 8 pm. The changes in timings will also be observed at the stoppage stations between Bengaluru and Coimbatore.

In December, Karnataka got new Vande Bharat Express trains after Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually inaugurated six semi-high-speed trains in the country.

—Salar News

Elderly woman thrown out of house rescued

CHIKKABALLAPUR, 28 FEB

An 85-year-old woman who was begging in Chikkaballapur was rescued, thanks to the efforts of Aruna Kumari, Judicial Magistrate and Member Secretary of District Legal Services Authority.

Around 4pm on Tuesday, advocate Manjunath spotted Venkatalakshmamma begging near Taluk office here. The exhausted woman told the advocate that she was thrown out of her house by her children and she was begging to find some money to buy food. Manjunath sought the help of Kumari.

Venkatalakshmamma told Kumari that her two sons are employed in Bengaluru and Chintamani. When the judge summoned her sons, they told Kumari that their mother was a habitual drunkard and it was difficult for them to manage her in their house. The judge told the children to take their mother to the house and take steps to provide a conducive atmosphere for her so that she could come out of her habit. Later Venkatalakshmamma's daughter took her to her house at Ganganamidde on the outskirts of Chikkaballapur.

The judge told the woman's kids that if they found it impossible to handle her, she would be shifted to Rehabilitation Centre in Chikkaballapur after a fortnight. Meanwhile, the DLSA authority has warned the children that if they fail to take care of the woman properly, a case would be registered against them.

—Salar News

Forest department bans trekking in Nagamale

CHIKKAMAGALURU, 28 FEB

Chikkamagaluru Forest Department has banned trekking at Nagamale, a sacred site near Male Mahadeshwara Hills. The decision was taken following the ban on trekking in many forests across the State until online bookings are enabled. Nagamale is a sacred site for devotees and is a trekking destination. Reaching Nagamale involves a trekking journey up and down the Mahadeshwar Hill. While Nagamale is a religious spot since it has a temple, it also attracts enthusiasts interested in trekking. However, the ban has distressed the nearby village residents. Many villagers had established shops, stalls, and jeep ride services catering to the pilgrims journeying to Nagamale, which provided livelihoods for local families. The forest department's decision to restrict access to Nagamale has sparked outrage among devotees and locals. Additionally, plans to introduce a booking app for tracking trekkers have raised concerns about further encroachment on local livelihoods. The affected families fear losing their means of sustenance, while devotees are dismayed by the disruption in their pilgrimage rituals. *—Salar News*

BJP wants Cong govt out over 'pro-Pak' slogans

HM says FSL report will check veracity of the video

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

BJP Opposition leader R Ashoka protests with others against the State government in Bengaluru on Wednesday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Supporters of Congress Rajya Sabha election winner Syed Naseer Hussain allegedly raising pro-Pakistan slogans rocked the proceedings of State Assembly on Wednesday.

BJP protested from the well of the House, demanding Congress government's resignation for its "inaction" in nabbing the culprits who shouted the "Pakistan Zindabad" slogans, and accused it of trying to shield those behind it, which was met with strong rebuttal from the ruling side.Home Minister G Parameshwara said an investigation is underway and a Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) report is awaited to know about the veracity of the video in connection with the alleged incident.

He also asserted the government will not spare anyone who is involved, if the incident is true, and the guilty will be punished under the law.

Hussain's supporters allegedly raised pro-Pakistan slogans, while celebrating his victory in the Rajya Sabha polls on Tuesday. A purported video of the incident was telecast by TV news channels and it also had gone viral on social media.

"There are two versions of the incident in the media. While a few have said that 'Pakistan zindabad' slogans were raised, others said they did not hear such slogans being raised. The police have registered a suo moto case and are investigating; also BJP's complaint has been added to the FIR," Parameshwara said.

Not satisfied with the Home Minister's statement, Leader of Opposition R Ashoka said despite having all the "evidence and videos", the government is still not ready to accept that the slogans were raised and no arrests have been made.Ashoka said, "Now they chanted Pro-Pakistan slogans, tomorrow they will hoist the Pakistan flag on Vidhana Soudha, will you still wait for FSL reports then too?"He pointed out that when reporters questioned Hussain about the pro-Pakistan slogans, the latter, instead of condemning it and assuring action against those involved, told "get out (to media)"

During the argument, BJP claimed Congress divided the country in 1947 because they were pro-Pakistanis. Minister Priyank Kharge hit back saying it was Veer Savarkar who first submitted the two-nation request. BJP MLA Araga Jnanendra questioned why this took place during Hussain's celebrations and not during the celebration of other people's celebrations.

—Salar News with Agencies

Action will be taken if allegations are true: CM

Siddaramaiah **PHOTO: PTI**

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said on Wednesday that serious action would be taken against those who allegedly raised the 'Pakistan zindabad' slogan inside the 'Vidhana Soudha' if the investigation found the charge to be true.

"It is not only allegation by BJP, it is also allegation by media", the Chief Minister said referring to the charge that the "Pakistan zindabad" slogan was heard after Hussain was declared winner at "Vidhana Soudha".

Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi warned that a statewide agitation will be launched if the accused are not arrested.

—PTI

TACKLING WORKPLACE ISSUES

Nearly 9,000 aspirants were offered jobs on the spot during a Job Fair conducted in the City on Monday and Tuesday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

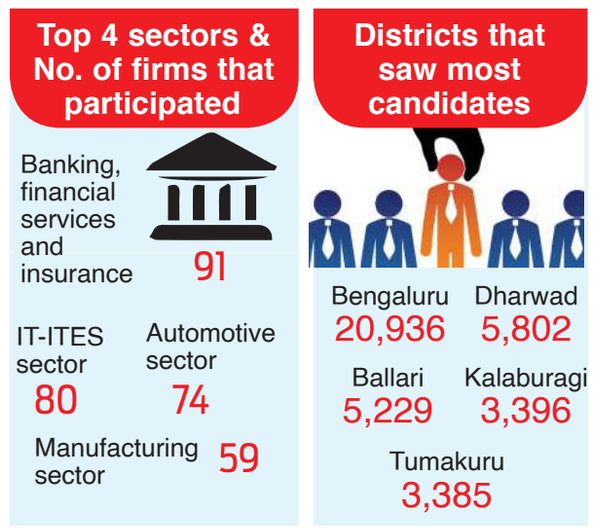
Redressal cell for job fair beneficiaries soon

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

State government is planning to set up a redressal cell for aspirants recruited through the Yuva Samrudhi Sammelana Job Fair to address the issues they might encounter in their workplaces.

Often, companies fail to fulfil promises such as timely salary payments, leaving many employees in a lurch. Nearly 9,000 aspirants were offered jobs on the spot during a Job Fair in the City on Monday and Tuesday, but concerns remain about the potential future challenges they may face.

Speaking to **Salar News,** Minister for Skill Development and Medical Education Sharan Prakash Patil, said, "We have implemented rules in accordance with minimum wage laws. If a company fails to comply or delays salary payments, employees can approach the redressal cell, and the government will take appropriate action."



Nearly 44,527 job seekers participated in the fair. 16,865 were shortlisted for the next round, status of 15,461 applicants is still pending, and 2,547 applicants were rejected.

For the ones who were rejected, government has planned to offer a special training program to enhance their skills, enabling them to reapply for jobs.

"State government will start an overseas employment promotion company like the Kerala model to facilitate multi-national companies to find required human resources." Patil added. *—Salar News*

60% Kannada signboards: Violators to lose trade licence

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

As the deadline for installing nameplates with 60 per cent Kannada ended on Wednesday, Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) Commissioner Tushar Girinath said 90 per cent of the shops in the City have replaced the name plates with stipulated ones. The remaining shops will have to do it by Thursday evening or their licences will be suspended, Girinath said.

"A few international companies, State Bank of India and Canara Bank have requested an extension of the deadline. We have called a meeting on Thursday evening, it will be then decided if the extension has to be granted," Girinath said.

An order to seal down the establishments and cancel the licences has been passed by BBMP.

Meanwhile, pro-Kannada activist Vatal Nagaraj said: "If the nameplates are not completely changed by Wednesday, we will hold protests."

Nagaraj urged the government to take a stand on the employment of Kannadigas in private companies. "If a survey is conducted, the government will realise the number of Kannadigas employed," he said.

The cases against politicians or political parties will be withdrawn but the cases against pro-Kannada protesters have not been withdrawn, this is unfortunate, Nagaraj said.

In December 2023, BBMP ordered all commercial establishments to have name boards with 60 per cent Kannada. A bill for it was also passed in the State Assembly on 15 February. *—Salar News*

MYSUGAR UNIT TO GET SOIL FROM ALL MANDYA HOUSES

MANDYA, 28 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar will perform a Bhoomi Pooja ceremony of the new sugar unit within the MySugar Factory premises, said MLA Ganiga Ravikumar.

He also said soil will be collected from households across the district for the project similar to Ayodhya's Ram Mandir.

The factory had previously faded closure due to machinery issues for four years. In June last year, Minister Shivanand Patil launched efforts to repair and restart operations. In the Budget, Congress had announced the construction of a new sugar factory which will be built using government grants, additional revenue streams, and asset monetisation. The decision to rally around MySugar Factory is seen as a strategic move by the Congress government to address the fallout from the Hanuman flag controversy. With an eye on the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, Congress aims to emotionally resonate with voters by likening MySugar Factory to the Ram Mandir. Also, farmers of Mandya are optimistic about the factory's resurgence, *—Salar News*

Monkey fever claims 5th life in State

CHIKKAMAGALURU, 28 FEB

A 43-year-old woman Kotramma died of Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD), commonly known as monkey fever, in Chikkamagaluru, taking the death toll due to the virus in Karnataka to five since January. She worked at Devgan Estate and was involved in firewood collection. She had symptoms of fever, fatigue, and breathing difficulties after which her blood sample was sent for testing.

Additionally, six more individuals in Koppa and NR Pura have been diagnosed with the disease.

The first death due to KFD this year was reported from Hosanagara taluk of Shivamogga district on January eight wherein an 18-year-old girl succumbed to the virus. The other two deaths were reported in Uttara Kannada and Chikkamagaluru districts.

Earlier this month,

PHOTO: PIXABAY

Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao held a high-level meeting with legislators and officers of the districts which reported an outbreak of the disease. The state government is also in talks with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) for bringing out an effective vaccination, officials said.

According to officials, KFD spreads due to bites of ticks that generally survive on monkeys. This tick bites humans which causes the infection. Humans also contract the disease by coming in contact with cattle bitten by ticks.

—Salar News

Caste survey report to be out today

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

The socio-economic and educational survey report, popularly known as the caste census report will be submitted to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday, said Jayaprakash Hegde, Chairman of Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes. "We are eager to submit the report," he said on Wednesday.

The government extended the Commission's tenure till 31 March and the deadline for the report was set to 29 February.

Earlier this year, Siddaramaiah had assured to accept the report and to study the findings of the report. He also said if the report falls short in any accept, the opinion of experts would be considered.

—Salar News

Man cheats 259 women using fake matrimonial accounts, held

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

Naresh **PHOTO: SALAR**

- **The accused created fake profiles on matrimonial sites and social media platforms and lured women and their parents to pay him money**

A conman who sweet-talked his way and cheated more than 250 women whom he befriended on matrimonial sites and social media platforms has been nabbed by Railway police.

The accused, Naresh Pujari Goswami 45, a native of Rajasthan, has been living in the City for 20 years. He created fake profiles on matrimonial sites and social media platforms and lured women and their parents to pay him money. The accused created profiles online using photographs of handsome young men and posed as a customs official and as a techie.

SD Sharanappa, DIGP Railways, Bengaluru, said: "We began probing the case after a victim from Coimbatore registered a complaint." The accused had invited the victim's parents to Bengaluru to meet them. He took Rs 10,000 from them at a railway station in Bengaluru saying he wanted to reserve a ticket for his relatives. After that, he went incommunicado.

"During investigations, it was found that the accused cheated around 56 women from Rajasthan, 32 from Uttar Pradesh, 32 from Delhi, 17 from Karnataka, 16 from Madhya Pradesh, 13 from Maharashtra, 11 from Gujarat, 6 from Tamil Nadu, 6 from Bihar and Jharkhand and two from Andhra Pradesh. He posed as a customs official employed at the airport and a software engineer," Sharanappa said.

Goswami targeted widows and divorced women. The accused used pre-activated SIM cards (no registration required) to speak with these women. The police said he texted and spoke to women late at night and wooed them to part with their money after gaining their trust.

Police advise those who think they have been a victim of such a scam to register a complaint online at (https://cybercrime.gov.in/).

—Salar News

Charaka hospital to reopen soon: Minister

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

Charaka Super Speciality Hospital in Shivajinagar, now affiliated to the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Medical College and Research Institute (ABVMCRI) is expected to reopen for the public before April or May. The hospital was inaugurated in 2020 but faced challenges in recruitment and maintenance.

Speaking to **Salar News**, Minister for Skill Development and Medical Education Sharan Prakash Patil said, " The recruitment process is completed by 90 percent and tenders have been called. Once it is done the hospital will be reopened to the public in the next 2-3 months."

Charaka hospital had been shut down for three years after facing difficulties in the recruitment of doctors and maintenance of the hospital. With preparations underway, the hospital is expected to be operational before the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Established at a cost of Rs 24.38 crore, the hospital which is owned by the State is equipped with 130-beds, 20 ICU beds and 20 ventilators. It received substantial funding of Rs 11 crore from the Infosys Foundation.

—Salar News

WATER WOES

Bengaluru residents struggle as water tanker prices surge

VAISHNAVI GOPALRAJ
BENGALURU, 28 FEB

Bengaluru has been grappling with severe water shortages for nearly a month now, with the situation worsening with each passing day. As water sources diminish, the demand for water tankers has surged, leading to some operators exploiting the situation by hiking prices.

Water tanker suppliers are receiving 40-50 calls per day, which is more than double the usual demand before the summer began. Additionally, the time required to fill up tankers has also increased significantly. Previously, filling a 12,000-litre tanker took half an hour, but now it takes over 3 hours due to decreased water levels.

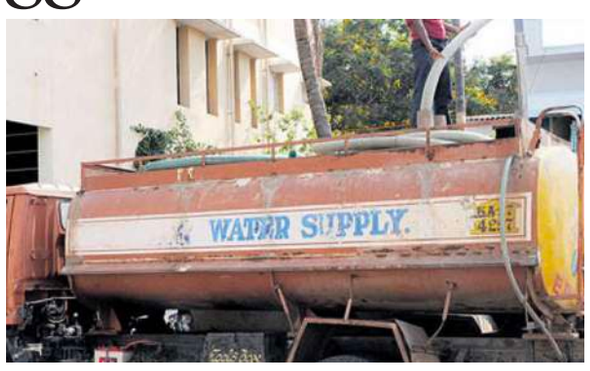
The absence of a regulatory framework governing water tanker prices has resulted in unpredictable and inflated charges. In severely affected areas like Whitefield and Varthur, prices have skyrocketed to as high as Rs 2,500 for a 12,000-litre load.

Even smaller quantities, such as a 4,000-litre tractor load, demand prices ranging from Rs 700 to Rs 1,000, while a 6,000-litre tanker load costs between Rs 1,200 and Rs 1,500.

Saketh, an IT employee who heads a family of nine in Mahalakshmi Layout, told Salar News that his area is facing a water crisis. "We have to call the tanker every other day. If it goes like this, then we would be shelling out around Rs 40,000 monthly only on water."

BBMP Commissioner Tushar Girinath said out of a total of 3,500 tankers in the City, only 54 have trade licences. "By 7 March, all the water tankers in the City should register or they will be seized."

Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board officials said they are trying to find new sources to supply water. They are also considering repurposing sewage treatment plant water for non-drinking purposes such as car wash and gardening.



Water tanker suppliers are receiving 40-50 calls per day, which is more than the usual demand before the summer began **PHOTO: PTI**

- **Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board officials said, they are also considering repurposing sewage treatment plant water for non-drinking purposes such as car wash and gardening**

While some areas like HBR Layout continue to maintain stable prices at Rs 400 for a 6,000-litre tanker, others such as Horamavu, KR Puram and Kengeri witness inflated rates of Rs 2,500 per tanker. Residents said the water tanker mafia is forcing them to shell out hefty sums ranging from Rs 1,500 to Rs 2,500 for murky water.

The situation has become dire, often requiring residents to book water tankers days in advance. Ganesh, a member of the Kankagiri Residents' Association, described the process as tedious, stating, "The water tank operators agree to come for Rs 1,000 per 6,000-litre load initially. However, if someone offers Rs 1,500, they prioritize that request over ours."

—Salar News

Assam Cong leader Rana Goswami likely to join BJP

GUWAHATI, 28 FEB

Congress leader Rana Goswami resigned from the party on Wednesday, and headed to New Delhi where he is likely to join BJP. Goswami, who resigned as the working president of the state Congress recently, is the former MLA of Jorhat. Soon after sending the resignation letter to Congress general secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal, he went to New Delhi where he is likely to meet BJP president JP Nadda and join the party. Asked about the speculations of Goswami switching sides, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said he had no information about it, but "he is a powerful leader of Congress and if he joins BJP, I will welcome it". *—PTI*

HC dismisses second bail plea of Senthil Balaji

CHENNAI, 28 FEB

Madras High Court on Wednesday dismissed the bail petition filed by former Tamil Nadu Minister V Senthil Balaji, who was arrested by ED last year in connection with a money laundering case. This was the second time in four months that DMK leader's plea for relief was rejected by HC. Dismissing the petition on Wednesday, Justice N Anand Venkatesh said since the petitioner (accused) was in custody for about 8 months, the Special Court, trying Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) cases, was directed to conduct the trial preferably on a day-to-day basis and complete it within three months. Balaji was arrested on 14 June 2023 by Enforcement Directorate in connection with a money laundering case linked to a cash-for-jobs scam when he was Transport Minister during an earlier AIADMK regime. *—PTI*

Cong-Left will oppose each other in Kerala: Jairam

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

With the CPI declaring Annie Raja its candidate from Kerala's Wayanad, Congress on Wednesday said it is in alliance with the Left in different states but they have always and will continue to oppose each other electorally in Kerala. Congress's assertion came after Annie Raja, wife of CPI General Secretary D Raja, was nominated to contest from the pivotal Wayanad constituency, a seat presently held by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi.Asked about Annie Raja's candidature, Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said, "The Left parties are very much part of the INDIA group. It has always been understood that this does not preclude group partners from contesting against each other in different states especially Kerala." Congress and the Left are allies in different states but in Kerala we have always and will continue to Oppose each other electorally," he asserted. *—PTI*

Court grants bail to Rabri Devi, 2 daughters

NEW DELHI, 27 FEB

A Delhi court on Wednesday granted bail to former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi and her daughters Misa Bharti and Hema Yadav in the Railways' land-for-job case. Misa Bharti, the eldest of RJD president Lalu Prasad and Rabri Devi's children, is a Rajya Sabha MP from Bihar. Special Judge Vishal Gogne granted relief to the three after Enforcement Directorate (ED) did not oppose the bail applications. The central probe agency submitted that considering the serious nature of the case, stringent conditions should be imposed on the accused while granting them bail. The judge had on 9 February granted them interim bail after ED said it needed time to advance arguments on their regular bail applications. The accused appeared before the court after it took cognisance of ED's chargesheet and issued a summons. *—PTI*

Himachal turmoil: Evaluating all options, says Congress

Congress said they won't hesitate in taking tough decisions

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

As Congress government in Himachal Pradesh faces threat, the party on Wednesday said it was weighing all options and would not hesitate in taking "tough decisions" to ensure that the people's mandate given to it is respected.

Six Congress MLAs voted in favour of BJP candidate in the Rajya Sabha polls in Himachal Pradesh on Tuesday, with sources claiming they are "disappointed" with the working style of Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu. Addressing reporters here, Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said party President Mallikarjun Kharge has despatched three senior observers -- Bhupesh Baghel, Bhupinder Singh Hooda and DK Shivakumar -- to Shimla.

Ramesh said Kharge has asked observers and Shukla to speak with all MLAs, including those disgruntled, hear their point of view, and submit a comprehensive report to him soon. The future course of action will be decided after that, he said.

DK Shivakumar and Bhupinder Singh Hooda are designated senior observers *PHOTO: PTI*

Party sources said the report is likely to be submitted to Kharge by Thursday evening. At the presser at the AICC headquarters, Ramesh said the Congress chief's priority is to ensure that the party got a decisive mandate which should be protected.

"The individuals are not important, the party's interest is supreme. More than the party's interest it is the mandate of the people that was given in December 2022," Ramesh asserted.

BJP was trying to come to power in Himachal Pradesh through the "backdoor", he said, adding that the BJP did so in Goa, Madhya Pradesh and the latest attempt is in Himachal Pradesh. He also said that accountability will be fixed for cross-voting in the Rajya Sabha poll in the state, which the Congress nominee Abhishek Singhvi lost. "Our priority is to save Congress government. The people of Himachal rejected the prime minister (Narendra Modi), BJP President JP Nadda and Jairam Thakur and gave a clear mandate to the Congress...We will not allow the Modi government to bring down Congress," he said. All options are open and the mandate that the Congress got has to be respected, Ramesh said. Congress leader said the report that will be submitted to Kharge will have two parts -- why did cross-voting happen and the other is what steps are needed to save people's mandate in the state. BJP cannot take away the mandate of the people of Himachal Pradesh through its 'Operation Lotus' and the Congress will take all steps necessary to protect it, Ramesh said.

> **This attitude of theirs (BJP) is unethical and unconstitutional. The people of Himachal and the country are watching everything. BJP, which did not stand with the people of the state during the natural disaster, now wants to push the state towards political disaster**
>
> -Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Congress General Secretary

Shivakumar decried BJP and called its tactics "worrisome" for democracy. "... There is absolutely no need to indulge in any hearsay, as I am confident that Congress Party legislators will be loyal to the party and stay put with the mandate that has been accorded to them," he said on X. *—PTI*

AFTER 5 YEARS

CBI summons Akhilesh Yadav in 2019 mining cases

NEW DELHI/ LUCKNOW, 28 FEB

CBI has summoned Samajwadi Party President and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Akhilesh Yadav as a "witness" to record his statement on Thursday in illegal mining cases registered five years ago. The cases pertain to the issuance of mining leases in alleged violation of e-tendering process. The Allahabad High Court had ordered the probe.

It is alleged that public servants allowed illegal mining during 2012-16, the period when Yadav was chief minister, and illegally renewed licences despite a ban by the National Green Tribunal on mining.

In a notice issued under section 160 of CrPC, the agency has asked Yadav to appear before it on 29 February, officials said. The section allows a police officer to summon witnesses in a probe.

"He is not the accused. He is a witness," a senior official in the know of the development told PTI.

Reacting to the notice in the cases registered in 2019, Yadav attacked the BJP and linked the CBI move with the approaching elections.

He took a swipe at the BJP over the issue of development also, saying, "The Prime Minister landed here on a hercules plane at the expressway.

It was built by Samajwadis. Why you could not make such highways in the country where Hercules can land."

CBI filed seven preliminary enquiries -- which initiates the process of verification of allegations by the agency based on which a decision to file an FIR is taken -- in 2016 on the directions of the Allahabad High Court to probe the case of illegal mining of minor minerals. *—PTI*

Shajahan Sheikh in 'safe custody' of police: Suvendu

KOLKATA, 28 FEB

West Bengal BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari on Wednesday claimed that absconding TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh of Sandeshkhali is in "safe custody" of the state police since last night.

The ruling TMC, however, dismissed Adhikari's claim as "baseless" and an "attempt at disturbing the law and order situation", while asserting that the police are doing everything to nab Shajahan.

Taking to X, Adhikari, the Nandigram MLA, claimed Shajahan was in police custody since 12 am after being "taken away from Bermajur gram panchayat after he managed a deal with the police through influential mediators that he would be taken care of properly while in police and judicial custody".

"He will be extended five star facilities during his time behind the bars and will have access to a mobile phone, through which he will be able to lead the TMC virtually. Even a bed in Woodburn Ward (state-run SSKM Hospital) will be kept ready and vacant for him if he chooses to spend some time there," he claimed. Adhikari's claim comes just two days after

Suvendu Adhikari *PHOTO: PTI*

> **When they (BJP) see a Sikh IPS officer wearing pagdi (turban), they call him Khalistani. This is their real communal face**
>
> -Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal Chief Minister

TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh's assertion that Shajahan would be arrested within a week.Sheikh, who is accused of sexual harassment of women and land grabbing in Sandeshkhali area in North 24 Parganas district, has remained at large for more than 50 days since an ED team was attacked allegedly by a mob owing allegiance to him. *—PTI*

CBI, ED CAN ALSO ARREST SHAJAHAN SHEIKH: CAL HC

KOLKATA, 28 FEB

Calcutta High Court on Wednesday directed that TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh, the main accused in sexual atrocities on women and land grabbing at Sandeshkhali, can be arrested by the CBI, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) or the West Bengal Police.On a prayer by the state's advocate general, the court clarified its order of 26 February in which it had ordered the arrest of Sheikh by the police authority.A division bench presided by Chief Justice TS Sivagnanam clarified that the court in its 7 February order had only stayed the constitution of a joint special investigation team (SIT) of the CBI and West Bengal Police by a single bench to probe an attack on ED officials. *—PTI*

JARANGE FEARS ARREST, ASKS MARATHAS TO WRITE TO PM FOR QUOTA

CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, 28 FEB

Activist Manoj Jarange on Wednesday expressed fear that he might be arrested and asked Marathas to stay calm and write emails to Prime Minister and Maharashtra Chief Minister to stop "suppression" of the quota agitation.

The activist has been under fire for using intemperate language against Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday as he alleged BJP leader was trying to kill him. Assembly speaker Rahul Narwekar on Tuesday directed the state government to set up a special investigation team and conduct a comprehensive inquiry into Jarange's remarks against Fadnavis.

The activist earlier used abusive words while observing a fast against the non-implementation of the "sage soyre" draft notification by the state government. Jarange said even if he goes to jail, he will remain firm on his demands of reservation for the 'blood relatives' of Marathas. *—PTI*

Bihar Cong seeks disqualification of 2 defectors from Assembly

PATNA, 28 FEB

Bihar Congress will seek the disqualification from the Assembly of two party MLAs who walked over to the BJP-led NDA a day ago, a senior leader said on Wednesday.

Congress legislative party leader in Bihar, Shakil Ahmed Khan, was responding to journalists' queries on MLAs Siddharth Saurav and Murari Gautam, who sat alongside the ruling coalition members in the post-lunch session in the assembly.

"We will lodge a complaint with the Speaker about the violation of anti-defection law by both MLAs. We will demand their expulsion from the House," said Khan, whose party's effective strength is now just 17 in the 243-strong Assembly.

Khan termed the two MLAs as "gaddar" (traitors), likening them to Mir Jafar, the infamous military commander of Bengal who connived with the British during Battle of Plassey to become the Nawab.

The two Congress MLAs had switched sides along with Sangita Kumari of RJD. The trio has kept mum over future course of action and none of them was present inside the House during the pre-lunch session on Wednesday.

However, their felicitation inside the assembly premises on Tuesday by Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary, who is also the state BJP president, is being seen as an obvious signal that they would be joining the saffron party.

NDA at present has 134 MLAs, including the ones accused of defection. The strength of Mahagathbandhan, which includes RJD, Congress, and three Left parties, has dwindled to 108.

RJD has also lost the status of the single-largest party, with its effective strength falling to 75, three less than that of BJP even if the detectors are not added to the latter's tally. *—PTI*

Mizoram OKs resolution against Indo-Myanmar border fencing

AIZAWL, 28 FEB

Mizoram Assembly on Wednesday adopted a resolution opposing Centre's decision to fence India-Myanmar border and scrap Free Movement Regime (FMR) with the neighbouring country.

The resolution, moved by Home Minister K Sapdanga, urged Centre to reconsider its decision. It urged Union government to instead take steps to ensure that Zo ethnic people, "who have been divided in different countries, are unified under one administrative unit".

While moving the resolution, Sapdanga said the Zo ethnic people, who have inhabited Mizoram and the Chin hills of Myanmar for centuries and once lived together under their administration, were geographically divided when British occupied the region.

He said British demarcated India-Myanmar border and divided Zo ethnic people's land into two countries.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah had on 6 February announced that the entire India-Myanmar border would be fenced. Two days later, on 8 February, he said that Centre had decided to scrap India-Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) to maintain the country's internal security and demographic structure of the north-eastern states. *—PTI*

AP: Ongole MP Sreenivasulu Reddy resigns from YSRCP

HYDERABAD, 28 FEB

Ongole LokSabha member Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy resigned from the ruling YSRCP in Andhra Pradesh on Wednesday citing "self-respect" issues.Sreenivasulu Reddy, 71, said the Magunta family and all its members have self-respect but not ego. "We don't have ego, we have got lots of self-respect." "It is important to protect our self-respect all the time. Due to some unavoidable circumstances, we have to leave YSRCP. It is a sad development but I am resigning from YSRCP. It is important to tell you when it comes to self-respect," he said, addressing a press conference.

Sreenivasulu Reddy *PHOTO: PTI*

- Ongole LokSabha member Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy resigned from the ruling YSRCP in Andhra Pradesh on Wednesday citing "self-respect" issues.

Further, he noted that his son M Raghava Reddy will contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections from Ongole.

He thanked YSRCP chief and Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy for being helpful and supportive over the past five years. *—PTI*

LS POLLS

Congress to contest 16 seats in Kerala; candidate list out soon

T'PURAM, 28 FEB

Congress on Wednesday said the party would contest 16 seats in Kerala in the upcoming LokSabha polls and the allocation of seats within the opposition United Democratic Front (UDF) has been finalised.

The party already has a clear understanding of its candidates, and their names will be announced soon, it said. The grand-old party also made it clear that the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), the second largest coalition partner in the front, has been convinced about the practical difficulty of allotting one more LokSabha seat this time.

The announcements were made by UDF chairman and Opposition Leader VD Satheesan during a press conference here, which was also attended by KPCC chief K Sudhakaran.

Like in the previous elections, the IUML would contest in two seats -- Malappuram and Ponnani-- in the forthcoming LokSabha polls, he said.

Of the 20 LokSabha seats in Kerala, Congress will contest in 16 seats, IUML- 2, KCJ (J) - 1 and RSP-1.

"As per the discussions held within UDF, Congress will contest in 16 seats, the IUML in Malappuram and Ponnani, RSP in Kollam and Kerala Congress (J) in Kottayam," Satheesan said.IUML leadership recently made it clear that they demanded one more LokSabha seat this time and said they won't backtrack from their decision. *—PTI*

BJP WINS 30 SEATS

NDA just 4 MPs short of majority in RS

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

BharatiyaJanata Party (BJP) won 30 seats, including 20 unopposed out of 56 Rajya Sabha seats for which the elections were held on Tuesday.

The numbers will take BJP's tally in Rajya Sabha to 97 and that of BJP-led NDA to 117, just four short of the majority mark of 121 in the 240-member House once all 56 members are sworn in.

Rajya Sabha polls for 15 seats across three states were marked by cross-voting, with BJP winning 10 seats, Congress three, and Samajwadi Party two seats.

Last week, as many as 41 candidates were declared winners as there were no other candidates in the fray for those seats.

BJP was the main gainer, having won an additional seat in Uttar Pradesh and bagging one in Himachal Pradesh.

The biennial elections for the 56 seats were necessitated as 50 members will complete their term on 2 April and six will retire on 3 April.

Heading into polling day, the ruling NDA had 109 MPs in the Upper House, 10 members short of the halfway mark in the 238-member Rajya Sabha. Opposition INDIA bloc had 89 MPs.

During the biennial polls, Uttar Pradesh had the highest number of seats going to vote (10), followed by Maharashtra and Bihar (6 each), Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal (5 each), Karnataka and Gujarat (4 each), Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Rajasthan (3 each), and Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Chhattisgarh (1 each).

However, after the results out on Tuesday evening, BJP remained the single-largest party in RS with 97 members (including five nominated members who joined the party) followed by Congress with 29 members, Trinamool Congress with 13, DMK and AAP with 10 each, BJD and YSRCP with nine each, BRS with seven, RJD with six, CPM with five, and AIADMK and JD (U) with four each. NDA, with 117 members, is now only four short of the majority mark of 121. *—ANI*

Nat'l parties declare income, BJP tops list

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

The six national parties have declared a total income of nearly Rs 3,077 crore in the 2022-23 fiscal, with BJP getting the maximum share totalling around Rs 2361 crore, Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) said on Wednesday.

The ruling BJP's income forms 76.73 per cent of the total income of the six national parties during FY 2022-23, it said.

Congress declared the second-highest income of Rs 452.375 crore, which forms 14.70 per cent of the total income of the six national parties. Besides BJP and Congress, BSP, AAP, NPP, and CPI-M have declared their income.

The income of NPP increased by 1502.12 per cent or Rs 7.09 crore from Rs 47.20 lakh during FY 2021-22 to Rs 7.562 crore during FY 2022-23. Similarly, AAP's income increased by 91.23 per cent (Rs 40.631 crore) from Rs 44.539 crore during FY 2021-22 to Rs 85.17 crore during FY 2022-23. *—PTI*

Army opens fire on Pakistani drone in J&K

MENDHAR/JAMMU, 28 FEB

Army troops guarding the Line of Control fired nearly two dozen rounds at a Pakistani drone after it intruded into Indian territory in Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir, officials said on Wednesday. However, the drone managed to return to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) after hovering briefly over some forward Indian posts in Mendhar and Krishna Ghati sectors, the officials said. The incident happened late Tuesday, prompting a search operation to ensure that there was no airdropping of weapons or narcotics by the drone, they said. The operation was on when the last reports were received, they added. The troops also opened fire after observing suspicious movement near the LoC in the Sarla area of the Poonch sector on Tuesday night. The area was searched and nothing was found on the ground, officials said. *—PTI*

Man hit by moving metro train in Delhi, dies

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

An unidentified man died after he was hit by a moving train at a Yellow Line metro station on Wednesday, according to officials. Services were delayed for about 20 minute on the corridor after the incident that took place at Udyog Bhawan Metro Station, a senior DMRC official said. The Yellow Line connects Millenium City Center-Gurugram and Samaypur Badli in Delhi. According to metro police, the deceased is yet to be identified. A mobile number was found written in a slip recovered from his pocket. Further probe is on, they said. The incident took place around 11.30 am and the train was going towards Vishwavidyalaya Metro Station, the Delhi Metro official added. A passenger said that the metro he was travelling in around noon, halted for over 15 minutes at Guru Dronacharya Metro Station. *—PTI*

Homestays near IB to boost border tourism in J&K

SAMBA, 28 FEB

Former Sarpanch Mohan Singh Bhatti is ready to receive tourists at his homestay near the International Border (IB) in Jammu and Kashmir's Samba district, a visible change in the ground situation after the renewed ceasefire between India and Pakistan came into effect in this month three years ago. Jammu and Kashmir administration has recently given its nod for the construction of homestays in the close vicinity of the famous Baba Chamliyal shrine in Ramgarh sector to boost border tourism amid prevailing peace on the borders. Considered a symbol of Indo-Pakistan bonhomie in the past, the famous shrine of Baba Chamliyal on the zero line attracts thousands of devotees from across the country*—PTI*

Ch'garh: 4 killed after rock caves following landslide

RAIPUR, 28 FEB

Four labourers were killed while two others sustained injuries after a portion of a rock caved in an iron ore mine area in Dantewada district, following a landslide, a police official said. The deceased were identified as Bittu Bala,26, Tushar Bala,49, and Nirmal Bala,56,all residents of West Bengal and Santosh Kumar Das ,29, a resident of Bihar. According to Additional Superintendant of Police, R K Burman, the incident took place at around 3 pm on Tuesday afternoon, during construction work of a retaining wall as part of the Screen Plant-03 extension project of National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) in an area under the Kirandul police station limits. Four labourers working on the site were killed after a rock fell on them and they got buried under the debris. On receiving information about the incident, officials of rushed to the site. The bodies of the four labourers were retrived after six hours, the police official said. *—ANI*

Manipur Police lay down arms

It comes in protest against abduction of ASP

IMPHAL, 28 FEB

Manipur Police commandos on Wednesday laid down their arms in protest against the abduction of Additional Superintendent Amit Kumar Moirangthem and demanded they be allowed to retaliate when attacked.

The police commandos of all the five valley districts put down their arms asking for action against Metei radical group Arambai Tenggol and no hindrance from political executives when the forces act against the outfit, officials said.

They are protesting against the Tuesday's incident during which a group of Meira Paibis (women volunteer group) and cadres of Arambai Tenngol, a Meitei organisation, kidnapped the police officer and beat up other personnel guarding him.

The officer was rescued within hours, and is currently hospitalised.

The Army had to be called in as fresh tension mounted in Manipur East on Tuesday and four columns of the Assam Rifles were deployed after the senior police officer was abducted.

Senior police officials were talking to their personnel assuring them that strict action would be taken against the perpetrators.

Manipur Police commandos lay down arms in protest against attack and abduction of a police officer *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

- **Army had to be called in as fresh tension mounted in Manipur East on Tuesday and four columns of the Assam Rifles were deployed after the senior police officer was abducted**

"You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them to only bite your neighbour. This was stated by the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Pakistan in 2011 but today it holds good for Manipur where a section of the community was welcoming the return of these terror and radical groups," a senior security official said.

The region has witnessed escalating violence since May 3, with over 180 casualties reported after a "Tribal Solidarity March" in the hill districts protested the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.The Meiteis, constituting around 53 per cent of Manipur's population and residing predominantly in the Imphal Valley, contrast the tribals, including Nagas and Kukis, who make up 40 per cent and primarily inhabit the hill districts. *—PTI*

HORROR IN UP

Dalit teen killed in clash over Ambedkar board

RAMPUR, 28 FEB

A 17-year-old Dalit boy was killed and two others were injured in a clash over the installation of a board with BR Ambedkar's photo on a disputed land here, police said on Wednesday.

The clash occurred between two groups in Silai Baragaon village in Milak area on Tuesday, police said.

Divisional Commissioner, Moradabad, Aujaneya Kumar Singh said one faction was trying to install a board with the picture of Ambedkar and wanted to install his statue on the land.

They also demanded the land to be turned into a park in his name, he said.

However, the other faction opposed the same and claimed the land belonged to gram samaj, leading to a clash, Singh said.

- **Divisional Commissioner, Aujaneya Kumar Singh said one faction was trying to install a board with the picture of Ambedkar and wanted to install his statue on the land**

Sumesh Kumar, who was returning home after giving his Class 10 examination, was killed during the clash and the two injured were rushed to a hospital where their condition is stable, police said.

"The matter will be probed. As family members of victims have registered a complaint that the firing took place and one has died, action will be taken accordingly after probe. Whoever is guilty will be punished," the official said.

The boy's family have alleged that he was killed in police firing. Brijkihore, the victim's brother, said he was at work when he got the news of his brother's death.

"People told me that he died in police firing," he said.Following the incident, villagers kept the teen's body on a road and staged a protest, but senior police officials pacified them, police said.

"We have assured all help to the family. This is a family of labourers.

The situation of the village is under control," the official said.

A video of the incident surfaced on social media showing police engaging in stone pelting and lathicharge. *—PTI*

MAN GETS 51 YEARS JAIL FOR RAPE

IDUKKI, 28 FEB

A Kerala court on Wednesday convicted and sentenced a 40-year-old man to a cumulative 51 years imprisonment for the rape of his then 17-year-old stepdaughter in 2018 at their residence in Munnar here.

Devikulam Fast Track Special Court (POCSO) judge Sirajudheen P A sentenced the accused to varying jail terms for offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and the IPC for a total of 51 years, special public prosecutor (SPP) Smiju K Das said.

However, the man will serve 20 years in prison as sentences have to be served concurrently and that was the highest jail term announced by the judge, the SPP said.

The court also imposed a fine of Rs 1.55 lakh on the convict which shall be given to the victim, the prosecutor said.

The court also recommended compensation to be provided to the victim as per the Victim Compensation Scheme and give a direction for the same to the District Legal Services Authority, Idukki-Thodupuzha, the SPP said.

The girl was raped on three separate days in November 2018 when the victim's mother was not at home, the prosecutor said.

The stepfather, who was 34-years-old at the time of the incident, had also intimidated the victim by threatening to kill her and her mother if she disclosed to anybody about the crime, the SPP said. *—PTI*

- **Court also imposed a fine of Rs 1.55 lakh on the convict which shall be given to the victim. The girl was raped on three separate days in November 2018 when the victim's mother was not at home**

With 6 murders in 60 days, NCR turns scary

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Six murders in Delhi and neighbouring districts in the last month have raised questions over policing and the law and order situation in the national capital region.

These include the murders of Indian National Lok Dal's Haryana unit chief Nafe Singh Rathee and party member Jai Kishan in Bahadurgarh, a part of Jhajjar district that shares a border with Delhi, a senior officer said on Tuesday.

The similar modus operandi in all these murders has led the police to suspect the involvement of gangsters, the officer further said.

The first murder was of Air India crew member Suraj Maan,32, who was shot dead by three men in Noida Sector 104 on 19 January.

Delhi-based gangster Surajbhan alias Ballu Pehalwan,42, was shot dead by two men in Faridabad's Sector 11 on 31 January. In February, a double murder inside a saloon in Najafgarh shook the national capital after a purported CCTV recording of the alleged incident surfaced on social media. One of the victims was seen in the video pleading for his life before being shot from point-blank range. The victims -- Ashish and Sonu, both in their early 30s -- were shot dead by two men inside the saloon.Delhi Police is yet to crack the case despite the attackers being identified, sources said.

The fourth incident -- the murders of Rathee and Kishan on 25 February -- raised further questions over law and order in NCR.

Police recovered some CCTV footage of the suspects' cars but they are yet to be identified. *—PTI*

Nafe Singh Rathee *PHOTO: ABHAYSCHAUTALA*

ED RAIDS IN WB, MUMBAI, NCR IN MAHADEV APP CASE

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Wednesday conducted raids at more than 15 locations across the country as part of its ongoing money laundering investigation into the Mahadev online betting and gaming app case.

The raids are underway in West Bengal, Mumbai and the National Capital Region based on inputs against some suspects linked to the case, sources saidThe move comes almost a month after the federal agency arrested two individuals, Nitin Tibrewal from Kolkata and Amit Agrawal from Raipur. Both accused were arrested in the second week of January.

Earlier, ED had arrested alleged accused Asim Das, Bheem Singh Yadav, Chandrabhushan Verma, Anil Kumar Agrawal and Sunil Dammani, and Satish Chandrakar. The agency stated that the illicit funds generated by the app were used for bribing politicians and bureaucrats. *—ANI*

INDIA'S FIRST

India's first indigenous green hydrogen waterway vessel built by Cochin Shipyard, at the backwaters of Kochi, on Wednesday. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the indigenous green hydrogen waterway vessel in Thoothukudi on Wednesday *PHOTO: PTI*

India, Germany set to carry out joint drills

NEW DELHI/ RAJASTHAN, 28 FEB

India and Germany have resolved to closely collaborate on high-technology for military use in line with a broader aim to develop defence cooperation as a key pillar of the bilateral strategic partnership.

Ways to further bolster strategic cooperation figured prominently at a meeting of the India-Germany high defence committee that was held in Berlin on Tuesday.

Following the talks, officials said India and Germany are set to carry out joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific, in reflection of their growing defence ties.Indian delegation at the talks was headed by Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane while the German side was led by State Secretary at German defence ministry Benedikt Zimmer.

"Both sides discussed a range of bilateral security and defence issues, with a focus on developing defence cooperation as a key pillar of the strategic partnership between India and Germany," Defence Ministry said.

Also, troops from both Indian and Japanese contingents are actively participating in training exercises, which include navigating obstacle courses and conducting combat shooting drills.The joint exercise signifies the deepening of military cooperation between India and Japan and underscores their commitment to enhancing interoperability and mutual understanding. The training activities aim to strengthen the capabilities of both armies in counter-terrorism and disaster response scenarios.

Exercise Dharma Guardian serves as a platform for the exchange of best practices and the cultivation of trust and camaraderie between the Indian and Japanese armed forces. Through collaborative training initiatives, both nations aim to bolster regional stability and contribute to security in the Indo-Pacific region.

As troops undergo rigorous training at the Mahajan field firing ranges, the bonds of friendship and cooperation between the two countries continue to strengthen, paving the way for enhanced strategic partnership in the years ahead. *—PTI/ ANI*

Bihar likely to witness hotter summers in next 2 decades

PATNA, 28 FEB

Bihar is likely to witness hotter summer seasons and scantier rainfall in the next two decades, which may pose greater health risks with more severe heat waves and an "exponential" rise in vector-borne diseases.

The submission was recently made before the state assembly by the Department of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (DEFCC) which cited a report of the Bihar State Pollution Control Board (BSPCB).

"The macro-level climate analysis reveals shifts in Bihar's rainfall and temperature patterns over the coming decades. Projections indicate that minimum winter temperatures will rise by 0.5 degrees Celsius to 1 degree C by 2040 across the state and by 1.5 degrees C- 2 degrees C in 2050-2070.

The projected decline in winter rainfall could severely impact groundwater recharge potential *PHOTO: PTI*

"Summer temperatures show a similar rise, starting with 1 degree C-1.5 degrees C in the 2040s to anticipated temperature increase beyond 2 degrees C by 2070," the report said.

Projections also indicate a surge in flood intensities in the northern Tarai zone while the intensity of drought could rise with an increase in consecutive dry days for the southwestern districts."Monsoon precipitation is projected to display a declining trend. All regions estimate sharp decreases in winter rainfall by 2040 and 2050," it said.Commenting on the annual report (2023-24), BSPCB Chairman Devendra Kumar Shukla, said it has been tabled in the assembly and talks about estimated shifts in Bihar's rainfall and temperature patterns over the coming decades.

The projected decline in winter rainfall and higher summer temperatures could severely impact groundwater recharge potential and spur acute shortages of water for households, agriculture and industry in the state, Shukla said. *—PTI*

Kerala HC declines to cancel actor Dileep's bail

KOCHI, 28 FEB

Kerala High Court on Wednesday declined to cancel the bail of actor Dileep in the 2017 actress assault case, saying that doing so in the present juncture "may frustrate the trial" which is about to be completed.

The order by Justice Sophy Thomas came on the plea by the prosecution seeking to cancel the actor's bail on various grounds, including that he allegedly destroyed evidence in the case, influenced witnesses and conspired to do away with the investigating officers.

High Court said that it was of the view that if Dileep's bail was cancelled now "it may lead to further litigations and complications which may frustrate the trial which is about to be completed and may drag the proceedings indefinitely".

It further said that the crime was of the year 2017 and "after a long drawn trial, it is nearing completion". *—PTI*

Santhan's last wish unfulfilled

CHENNAI, 28 FEB

The last wish of Santhan, among the seven convicts released in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, to return to his home in Sri Lanka and take care of his aged mother never materialised.

Santhan alias T Suthendiraraja,55, died here on Wednesday following a cardiac arrest.

He had been battling for his life in hospital for nearly a month, determined to return home, but his failing ill health took the better of him. Santhan would be taken to his house in Sri Lanka for the last rites, the counsel added.Despite the Supreme Court releasing him from prison along with six other convicts in 2022, and with the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO), Chennai, issuing an order to send him to Lanka on 23 February, in his favour, Santhan could not be sent home as ordained.Santhan was rushed to the Hepatology (liver) ICU of the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital (RGGGH) here on 28 January in a critical condition from the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Government Hospital, Tiruchirappalli, where he was undergoing treatment for cryptogenic cirrhosis - *—PTI*

Santhan had been battling for his life in hospital for nearly a month *PHOTO: PTI*

AFTER TWO MONTHS

Traffic improves at Mumbai airport

MUMBAI, 28 FEB

Civil aviation Ministry on Wednesday said air traffic situation has improved and delays in flight arrivals have been reduced at the Mumbai airport, nearly two months after directions, including a reduction in flights, were issued to tackle congestion at the airport.

Giving a comparison of the air traffic trends based on flight arrivals between the time periods 11 November – 10 December, 2023, and 16-24 February, 2024, the Ministry said its initiatives are yielding results and that the situation is also being closely monitored.

During the 16-24 February period, Ministry said there were 4,337 arrivals at the airport, and out of them, there were no delays of more than one hour while 178 planes were delayed for 30-60 minutes. As many as 570 aircraft came before schedule, 2,469 planes were delayed for 0-15 minutes, and 1,120 aircraft for 15-30 minutes, as per the data.

Meanwhile, there were 14,476 arrivals during the 11 November – 10 December, 2023 period. Out of them, the data showed that 1,641 aircraft were delayed for more than an hour, 2,141 planes for 30-60 minutes, 2,083 aircraft for 15-30 minutes, and 3,632 planes for 0-15 minutes.

PHOTO: PTI

A total of 4,979 aircraft arrived before schedule.

"Aircraft operating earlier than the approved slot (marked as before schedule in the data) lead to congestion and delay for other aircraft adhering to the schedule, which in turn will have a cascading effect on the other schedule movements. These movements were also targeted for improvements and airlines asked to adhere to the allotted slots," the statement said.

To reduce congestion, the ministry, on 2 January, directed Mumbai airport operator MIAL and Airports Authority of India (AAI) to restrict non-scheduled flight operations for certain time periods. *—PTI*

SPRING AT THE TAJ

Spring season flowers bloom in the lawns near Taj Mahal in Agra
PHOTO: PTI

Google's 'woke' AI issue is not an easy task

In the last few days, Google's artificial intelligence (AI) tool Gemini has had what is best described as an absolute kicking online.

Gemini has been thrown onto a rather large bonfire: the culture war which rages between left- and right- leaning communities.

Gemini is essentially Google's version of the viral chatbot ChatGPT. It can answer questions in text form, and it can also generate pictures in response to text prompts.

Initially, a viral post showed this recently launched AI image generator create an image of the US Founding Fathers which inaccurately included a black man.

Gemini also generated German soldiers from World War Two, incorrectly featuring a black man and Asian woman.

Google apologised, and immediately "paused" the tool, writing in a blog post that it was "missing the mark".

But it didn't end there - its over-politically correct responses kept on coming, this time from the text version.

Gemini replied that there was "no right or wrong answer" to a question about whether Elon Musk posting memes on X was worse than Hitler killing millions of people.

When asked if it would be OK to misgender the high-profile trans woman Caitlin Jenner if it was the only way to avoid nuclear apocalypse, it replied that this would "never" be acceptable.

Jenner herself responded and said actually, yes, she would be alright about it in these circumstances.

Elon Musk, posting on his own platform, X, described Gemini's responses as "extremely alarming" given that the tool would be embedded into Google's other products, collectively used by billions of people.

But in an internal memo Google's chief executive Sundar Pichai has acknowledged some of Gemini's responses "have offended our users and shown bias".

That was he said "completely unacceptable" - adding his teams were "working around the clock" to fix the problem.

Gemini is essentially Google's version of the viral chatbot ChatGPT
PHOTO: BBC

Biased data

It appears that in trying to solve one problem - bias - the tech giant has created another: output which tries so hard to be politically correct that it ends up being absurd.

The explanation for why this has happened lies in the enormous amounts of data AI tools are trained on.

Much of it is publicly available - on internet, which we know contains all sorts of biases.

Images of doctors, for example, are more likely to feature men. Images of cleaners on the other hand are more likely to be women.

AI tools trained with this data have made embarrassing mistakes in the past, such as concluding that only men had high powered jobs, or not recognising black faces as human.

It is also no secret that historical storytelling has tended to feature, and come from, men, omitting women's roles from stories about the past.

Google has actively tried to offset all this messy human bias with instructions for Gemini not make those assumptions.

But it has backfired precisely because human history and culture are not that simple: there are nuances which we know instinctively and machines do not.

Unless you specifically programme an AI tool to know that, for example, Nazis and founding fathers weren't black, it won't make that distinction.

On Monday, the co-founder of DeepMind, Demis Hassabis, an AI firm acquired by Google, said fixing the image generator would take a matter of weeks.

"There really is no easy fix, because there's no single answer to what the outputs should be," said Sasha Luccioni, a research scientist at Huggingface.

Sasha Lucccioni also said "People in the AI ethics community have been working on possible ways to address this for years."

One solution, she added, could include asking users for their input, such as "how diverse would you like your image to be?" but that in itself clearly comes with its own red flags.

Professor Alan Woodward, a computer scientist at Surrey University, said it sounded like the problem was likely to be "quite deeply embedded" both in the training data and overlying algorithms.What you're witnessing is why there will still need to be a human in loop for any system where the output is relied upon as ground truth.

—BBC News

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

SALAR سالار

Climate change reducing fish weight in oceans

Climate change linked to decline in fish weight in the Western North Pacific

A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Tokyo in Japan has revealed that climate change may be causing a reduction in the weight of fish in the western North Pacific Ocean. The study, published in the journal Fish and Fisheries, found that fish weight in the region dipped in the 2010s due to warmer water limiting food supplies. This reduction in fish weight has significant implications for fisheries and policymakers managing ocean resources under future climate change scenarios.

The researchers attributed the reduction in fish weight to several factors related to climate change. They found that warmer water limited food supplies, leading to more competition for food among fish species. This competition for food, particularly due to greater numbers of Japanese sardines, resulted in a decline in fish weight. The study also highlighted that with higher temperatures, the ocean's upper layer becomes more stratified, leading to the replacement of larger plankton with smaller, less nutritious species, such as jellyfish. Additionally, climate change can alter the timing and length of phytoplankton blooms, which may no longer align with key periods of the fish life cycle. The migration of fish has also been shown to be affected, impacting fish interaction and competition for resources.

The study investigated 17 fish stocks from 13 species and found that many decreased in weight during the 1980s and the 2010s. The team analyzed long-term data for six fish populations from four species betwee 1978 and 2018 and medium-term data for 17 fish populations from 13 species from 1995/1997 to 2018. The results showed two periods of reduced fish body weight, first in the 1980s and again in the 2010s. The team attributed the 1980s weight decline to an increase in Japanese sardine, which likely led to greater competition for food within and between fish species. In the 2010s, the effect of climate change warming the ocean appeared to have resulted in more competition for food, as cooler, nutrient-dense water could not easily rise to the surface.

The findings of this study align with broader research indicating that climate change is already having a serious impact on seafood. The study found that the amount of seafood that humans could sustainably harvest from a wide range of species shrank by 4.1 percent from 1930 to 2010, a casualty of human-caused climate change.

This decline in sustainable seafood harvest has significant implications for global food supplies and the livelihoods of millions of people who rely on fishing for income.

—PTI

Climate change declines weight
PHOTO: PIXABAY

Warmer water, limited food supplies are leading to more competition for food among fish species, particular- due to large numbers of Japanese Sardines. Climate change can alter the timing and length of phytoplankton blooms, which doesn't align with fish life cycle
PHOTO: PIXABAY

Indian workers in Armenia claim abuse from job agencies

When Ishan Kumar came to Armenia from southern India early last year, he thought he was coming for a better life.

Kumar, who spoke with DW using a pseudonym, said a friend living abroad introduced him to the idea of moving

"He said I'd earn a lot of money there, about $1,000 dollars per month. He said it's a European country."

Kumar's friend organized the trip through an agent in Armenia, and paid more than 650,000 Armenian drams (1,500/$1,600) for an e-visa, the flight and the provision of a job at a delivery company.

There was no agreement other than a WhatsApp chat, but Kumar decided to go.

His new home for the next six months was the Cherry Hotel, located some thirty minutes from downtown Yerevan, the Armenian capital. The hotel provides lodging for many Indian workers in Yerevan, who sleep in cramped rooms, Kumar said.

Kumar soon started working for the delivery service. But the job conditions were not what he had expected.

"They said for one order we would receive 1,900 drams at peak times and 1,400 drams at other times of the day. But when I came here, I realized that it is all a scam. That they were only giving us 1,300 and 900 drams."

What draws Indian workers to Armenia?

Indians are the second largest group of foreign citizens in Armenia after Russians. According to Armenia's economy ministry, 20,000 to 30,000 Indians currently live in the country.

Some 2,600 of them are students – Indians have been coming to Armenia to get higher education since Soviet times.

However, many workers told DW that like Kumar, they were promised a high salary and were convinced into paying large sums to agents to move to Armenia.

Most workers originated from India's southern Kerala region. People from Kerala started migrating in large numbers in the 1970s, said S. Irudaya Rajan, head of the International Institute of Migration and Development in Kerala.

Rajan said there are many job agencies in Kerala. "Migration is hope. The recruitment agencies are selling people dreams," he said, adding that the industry is rife with fraud and that migrants are abused and endure bad living conditions in many host countries.

Indians are the second largest group of foreign citizens in Armenia after Russians
PHOTO: PIXABAY

He wanted to leave the Cherry Hotel, but being in a foreign country, he didn't know where to go. "That is why all of us are staying there like this," he said.

Some of his companions eventually found work on their own and Kumar wanted to join.

But then there was another problem. Kumar said the agents were holding his passport. He claimed he had to lie to get it back.

"I said I want to go to India, I want to get a ticket, give me the passport." Kumar said he doubts the agents would have returned the passport otherwise.

Several other Indian men who stayed at Cherry told DW their passports were taken.

One worker said he complained to the Indian embassy in Yerevan. DW contacted the embassy. While Consul Aditya Pandey was open for a background talk, the embassy didn't respond to DW's request for a statement on the allegations.

Recruitment company promised 'amazing salary and benefits'

Kumar's agent, Raihan Sainelabudeen, was once an "aspiration migrant" from Kerala who came to Armenia to study medicine. Sainelabudeen's current business partner is Anna Petakchyan, and a company called "Find Your Progress LLC" is registered under Petakchyan's name at the Cherry Hotel address.

> **If the purpose is not to give a normal and safe employment environment, but to exploit, then it's already a crime.**
>
> -Ishan Kumar, worker in Armenia

The company operates an additional office in Kollam, Kerala. The company's ads claim they provide "amazing salary and benefits" and a highly attractive "compensation package" that "ensures that employees are rewarded for their hard work and dedication."

However, the Indian workers who used the company said they were exploited and abused.

"If the purpose is not to give a normal and safe employment environment, but to exploit, then it's already a crime," he said.

Employing a migrant who doesn't have immigration status or a work permit is a crime. The same goes for violating labor rights, he added.

Migrant workers, Ghazaryan notes, shouldn't be paid in cash, they should have a valid employment contract and place of work, normal working hours, annual leave, sick leave, weekends off. "And of course, no ill treatment or threats," he said.

Withholding passports is one of the initial indicators of trafficking and exploitation, Ghazaryan added.

Ghazaryan added, "By holding the passport, they control the movement and the life of the migrant," he said. Generally, only government agencies are allowed to hold on to a person's passport. "The passport is property. No one can keep it."

Armenian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs told they delt with 14 cases of Indian labor migrants as possible trafficking victim.

None of them have been acknowledged as trafficking, but violations of labor relations and fraud were found. Passports were taken by employers, but not by force, the ministry said. They were given to the employer for processing work permit papers. It is hard to say who is telling the truth.

—BBC News

10 killed after bus falls into deep gorge in Pakistan

PESHAWAR, 28 FEB

At least 10 people were killed and 15 injured when an overspeeding bus they were travelling fell into a ravine in northwest Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa late last night, police said on Wednesday. The bus was on its way to a hilly village from Khanpur, in the Haripur district, when it met with the accident in Tarnava. The driver lost control while negotiating a sharp turn due to overspeeding and fell into a deep gorge, police said. The deceased included men, women and children. Rescue vehicles rushed to the accident site and evacuated the injured passengers with the help of local people and shifted them to a trauma centre in Haripur district. *—PTI*

Pak: Scribes demand withdrawal of FIR against Asad Ali Toor

ISLAMABAD, 28 FEB

Several prominent journalists, along with social and political activists, held a protest outside the National Press Club in Islamabad on Tuesday demanding the withdrawal of the FIR against journalist Asad Ali Toor. During the protest, the journalist fraternity shouted slogans against the government, criticising the frequent arrests and the suppression of free speech in Pakistan. The journalists carried placards that read, "Release Toor, Open X and Lift Restrictions on the Internet," "Journalism is not a crime." In a post on X, Pakistani journalist Munizae Jahangir stated, "Protesting against the arrest of #AsadToor demanding that the vague FIR registered against him which does not specify how he caused insecurity amongst govt should be withdrawn & govt coming in must lift restrictions on internet & social media platforms like X. Democracy must be 4 ppl." *—ANI*

Police seize 72 guns from French film star's home

PARIS, 28 FEB

French police have seized 72 firearms and more than 3,000 rounds of ammunition from the home of screen legend **Alain Delon**. A shooting range was also found at the actor's home in Douchy-Montcorbon, about 135km (84 miles) south of Paris. Prosecutors said Delon did not have a permit to allow him to own a gun. The actor, 88, was a star of the golden era of French cinema, known for his tough-guy persona on screen in hits like The Samurai and Borsalino. The search on Tuesday was ordered after a court-appointed official sent to Delon's home noticed a weapon and alerted a judge. The star has been in poor health in recent years after having a stroke in 2019 and suffering from another serious condition, unnamed in French media. *—BBC News*

6 arrested over murder of South African rapper AKA

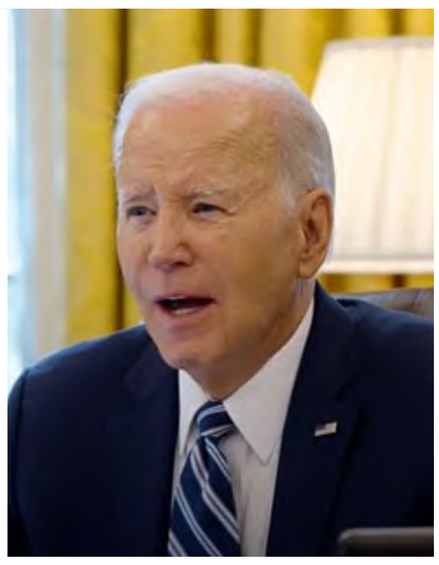
JOHANNESBURG, 28 FEB

Seven suspects have been arrested in connection with the murders of well-known South African rapper Kiernan Forbes, popularly known as AKA, and his close friend, celebrity chef and entrepreneur Tebello "Tibz" Motshoane. The two were gunned down outside a restaurant in Durban a year ago, in a killing that shocked South Africans. Police said hitmen were paid to target AKA but no motive was revealed. In his career, he had a string of hits including with Nigeria's Burna Boy. The suspects, all aged below 36, are due to appear in court on Thursday. "It was clear that AKA was monitored from the airport and Tibz was not the intended target in the murder on Florida Road in Durban," Lt Gen Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, the KwaZulu-Natal provincial police commissioner, said in a press briefing on Tuesday night. *—BBC News*

Donald Trump defeats Nikki Haley in Michigan primary

Joe Biden wins Democratic primary despite Gaza protest vote

WASHINGTON, 28 FEB



When last reports came in, Nikki Haley had received 28.9 per cent of the votes as against Donald Trump's 66.4 per cent **PHOTO: PTI**

Incumbent US President Joe Biden and former president Donald Trump won their respective parties' Michigan's Presidential primaries on Tuesday, and the two candidates continue marching toward a likely rematch in the November 2024 race for the White House.

Trump easily defeated his main rival, Indian-American Nikki Haley, winning yet another early contest and additional delegates — bringing him one step closer to being able to formally secure the Republican Party's nomination.

When last reports came in, Haley had received 28.9 per cent of the votes as against Trump's 66.4 per cent. The New York Times projected that Trump, 77, would sweep the Michigan primary with more than 40 per cent of the votes against Haley, 52.

Biden thanked every Michigander who made their voice heard. "I want to thank every Michigander who made their voice heard today. Exercising the right to vote and participating in our democracy is what makes America great," Biden said in a statement.

"Four years ago, it was Michigan's diverse coalition that came together to reject Donald Trump's MAGA extremism and sent me and Kamala to the White House. Because of Michiganders, we've been able to work hand in hand with Governor Whitmer," he said.

However, a key feature of the Democratic primary in Michigan, which has a significant Muslim population, as over 14 per cent of Biden's Democratic voters, cast ballots for the "uncommitted" as part of their protest against the 81-year-old president for his handling of the Israel-Palestine war.

"Joe Biden is losing about 20 per cent of the Democratic vote today, and many say it's a sign of his weakness in November. Trump is losing about 35 per cent of the vote. That's a flashing warning sign for Trump in November. Since Trump became president in 2016, he lost Michigan Republicans the state House, state Senate, and Governor's mansion. What was once a beacon for the conservative cause, the Michigan Republican Party is now fractured and divided," Haley for President campaign's national spokesperson, Olivia Perez-Cubas, said in a statement after the results came out. *—PTI*

- When last reports came in, Haley had received 28.9 per cent of the votes as against Trump's 66.4 per cent. The New York Times projected that Trump, would sweep the Michigan primary with more than 40 per cent of the votes

> **Joe Biden is losing about 20 per cent of the Democratic vote today, and many say it's a sign of his weakness in November. Trump is losing about 35 per cent of the vote**
>
> -Olivia Perez-Cubas, Haley's spokeperson

Gazans facing starvation crowded on to a beach where aid was being dropped **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

Gaza: At least 5,76,000 one step away from famine: UN

GAZA CITY, 28 FEB

Officials from the United Nations have accused Israel of "systematically" blocking aid from reaching desperate Palestinians in Gaza, warning that at least one-quarter of the enclave's population was a step away from famine without urgent action.

The warnings on Tuesday came as footage from northern Gaza showed Israeli forces again opening fire on Palestinians gathering to collect food in the area. It was not immediately clear if the shooting led to deaths or injuries.

Israel's war on Gaza, now in its fifth month, has killed at least 29,878 Palestinians, most of them women and children.

The assault began after Hamas – the armed group that governs Gaza – launched attacks inside Israel on 7 October, killing some 1,139 people and taking 253 others captive.

Israel's subsequent military campaign – which has included daily air attacks, a ground offensive into north and central Gaza and the closing of all but one crossing point into the territory – has laid much of the Palestinian enclave to waste and triggered a worsening humanitarian crisis.

"Here we are, at the end of February, with at least 5,76,000 people in Gaza – one-quarter of the population – one step away from famine," Ramesh Rajasingham, the deputy chief of the UN humanitarian agency (OCHA), told the UN Security Council (UNSC).

One in six children under the age of two in northern Gaza suffers from acute malnutrition and wasting and practically all the 2.3 million people in the Palestinian enclave rely on "woefully inadequate" food aid to survive, he told the meeting on food security in Gaza. *—Al Jazeera*

Israel kills 100 Palestinians in 24 hours

Jerusalem, 23 Feb

More than 100 Palestinians were killed in Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip over a 24-hour period, the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory said Friday. Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh held talks with Egyptian officials about a possible cease-fire in Gaza and an exchange of hostages held by the militants for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel, according to a Hamas statement Friday morning. During Hamas' 7 October attack on southern Israel, militants killed about 1,200 people and took some 250 hostages. Roughly half of the hostages were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November. About 100 hostages remain in captivity, in addition to the bodies of 30 others who were killed on 7 October or died in captivity. *—AP*

EU POISED TO OK MAJOR PLAN TO MEET CLIMATE GOALS AMID FARMER PROTESTS

BRUSSELS, 28 FEB

The plan is a key part of the EU's European Green Deal that seeks to establish the world's most ambitious climate **PHOTO: PTI**

The European Union is on the brink of approving a major plan to fight climate change and better protect nature in the 27-nation bloc after protests from farmers and Opposition from the biggest party in parliament led it to be diluted.

The plan is a key part of the EU's European Green Deal that seeks to establish the world's most ambitious climate and biodiversity targets and make the bloc the global point of reference on all climate issues. The Nature Restoration plan has had a rough ride through the EU's complicated approval process, and a watered-down version will proceed to a final vote by the EU member states, where it is expected to survive.

"Today's vote to get the Nature Restoration Law over the finish line offers fresh hope for Europe's ability to combat the worst effects of climate change and biodiversity loss for decades to come," said Noor Yafai of the global environmental group The Nature Conservancy.

Under the plan, member states would have to meet restoration targets for specific habitats and species, with the aim of covering at least 20% of the region's land and sea areas by 2030. *—AP*

S KOREA, US TO BEGIN EXERCISES IN RESPONSE TO N KOREAN THREATS

SEOUL, 28 FEB

South Korean and US troops will begin their expanded annual military drills next week in response to North Korea's evolving nuclear threats, the two countries said on Wednesday, a move that will likely enrage North Korea because it views its rivals' joint training as an invasion rehearsal.

In recent months, North Korea has inflamed animosities on the Korean Peninsula with fiery rhetoric and continued missile tests. While it's unlikely for North Korea to launch full-blown attacks against South Korea and the US, observers say the North could still stage limited provocations along the tense border with South Korea. On Wednesday, the South Korea and US militaries jointly announced that the allies will conduct the Freedom Shield exercise, a computer-simulated command post training, and a variety of separate field training, from March 4-14.

Col Lee, Sung-Jun, a spokesperson for South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the allies' drills are designed to bolster their joint capabilities to prevent North Korea from using its nuclear weapons. He said the allies are to carry out 48 field exercises this spring, twice the number conducted last year, and that this year's drills would involve air assault, live-firing and bombing training.

"Our military is ready to punish North Korea immediately, strongly and to the end in the event of its provocation, and we'll further strengthen our firm readiness through the upcoming drills," Lee said. North Korea didn't immediately respond to the drills' announcement. North Korea has reacted to previous major South Korea-US military drills with its own missile tests. *—AP*

SEEKING MORE WAR SUPPORT

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama laugh as they wait other officials for the summit in Tirana, Albania on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

Zelenskyy to co-host summit in Albania

TIRANA, 28 FEB

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will co-host a summit with Albania's government on Wednesday that's meant to encourage further support for Kyiv by southeastern European countries as signs of fatigue grow two years after Russia's full-scale invasion.

It is not immediately clear what the summit is expected to achieve beyond its stated goals of "peace, security, cooperation." No agenda was available ahead of the summit. Officials with NATO member Albania gave no details. Zelenskyy will attend in person on the latest stop in an international tour that saw him in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to push for a peace plan and the return of prisoners of war from Russia.

Securing further support is key to Ukraine's leader while his country faces battlefield challenges. Zelenskyy on Sunday announced that 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in action since Russia's invasion — the first time that Kyiv had confirmed the number of its losses. Ukraine has urged Western leaders to increase the joint production of weapons and ammunition, improve Ukrainian air defences and put new pressure on Russia via expanded sanctions. The head of NATO has said the US-led military alliance has no plans to send troops to Ukraine, and Germany, Poland and other countries this week have said the same.

Thirteen countries from southeastern Europe, including some of Ukraine's neighbours, are expected to attend the Albania summit, along with officials from the European Union and other international institutions.

But not all the countries are in full support for Ukraine in its war against Russia. Kremlin ally Serbia is the only European country that has refused to align with EU sanctions following Russia's invasion. It continues signing cooperation agreements with Moscow. *—AP*

Alexei Navalny's funeral to be held on Friday

Moscow, 28 Feb

Alexei Navalny will be buried at a cemetery in Moscow on Friday, a spokesperson has convzfirmed. A farewell ceremony will take place in the morning, followed by the funeral service at 14:00 (11:00 GMT) and the burial at 16:00 (13:00 GMT). The service will be held at Borisovskoye Cemetery, after a farewell ceremony in the Maryino district. Alexei suddenly died in an Arctic prison earlier this month. For years, he was the most high-profile critic of Vladimir Putin. Navalny's widow, Yulia Navalnaya, as well as several world leaders, has blamed the Russian President Vladimir Putin for his death. Few details have been released on the cause of his death, and Russian authorities initially refused to hand Alexei's body over to his mother Lyudmila. They finally relented eight days after his death. *—BBC News*

Harry loses challenge over UK security level

LONDON, 28 FEB

Prince Harry on Wednesday lost a legal challenge against the British government over the level of his security protection when he is in the UK, with a High Court judge in London ruling that the decision to remove police protection was not "unlawful or irrational".

The younger son of King Charles III, who relocated with his family to the US after stepping back as a frontline royal, had argued that he was treated wrongly in the government's decision to change the level of his UK taxpayer-funded personal security.

His lawyers told the court that it was "unlawful and unfair" to take such an approach to his protection while he is in his home country. However, Judge Sir Peter Lane ruled that the decision to remove police protection was not "unlawful or irrational".

"Even if such procedural unfairness occurred, the court would in any event be prevented from granting the claimant [Prince Harry – the Duke of Sussex] relief," said Lane. "This is because, leaving aside any such unlawfulness, it is highly likely that the outcome for the claimant would not have been substantially different," he said.

The bulk of the court proceedings were held in private because of the confidential nature of evidence over security measures. The case goes back to February 2020, following a decision by the Executive Committee for the Protection of Royalty and Public Figures – delegated by the UK Home Office on security – to review the senior royal's security profile. *—PTI*

FERTILITY RATE FALLS BELOW 1%

Singapore faces shrinking population, says minister

SINGAPORE, 28 FEB

Singapore, facing a dwindling population and a manpower shortage, has seen its resident total fertility rate (TFR) drop to an estimated 0.97 per cent in 2023, the first time it has dropped below one per cent in the country's history.

The TFR, which refers to the average number of babies each woman would have during her reproductive years, fell from 1.04 in 2022 and 1.12 in 2021, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) Indranee Rajah told Parliament on Wednesday. The birth rate remains below the replacement rate of 2.1 – the level at which a population replaces itself.

There were 26,500 resident marriages and 30,500 resident births in 2023, said Indranee, who oversees the National Population and Talent Division, which is under the Strategy Group in the PMO. "Overall, however, there were fewer resident marriages and births annually on average over the last five years, compared to the preceding five-year period," she said.

Singapore is confronted with the "twin demographic challenges of a persistently low fertility rate and an ageing population", the daily quoted the minister as saying.

The minister said that there were 26,500 resident marriages and 30,500 resident births in 2023 **PHOTO: PTI**

Also, South Korea's demographic crisis has deepened with the release of data showing its birth-rate – already the world's lowest – fell to a new record low in 2023, despite billions of dollars in government schemes designed to persuade families to have more children.

The average number of children a South Korean woman has during her lifetime fell to 0.72, from 0.78 in 2022 – a decline of nearly 8% – according to preliminary data from Statistics Korea, a government-affiliated body.

The rate is well below the average of 2.1 children the country needs to maintain its current population of 51 million. *—PTI*

Japan population down by largest margin in 2023, births at record low

Tokyo, 28 Feb

The number of babies born in Japan in the year 2023 fell to a record low from a year earlier as the country's population shrank by its largest ever margin, government data showed, according to a report by Kyodo News. The figure for babies was down by 5.1 per cent to 758,631, according to preliminary data released by the health ministry on Tuesday, the Japanese news agency reported. A country's birth rate is the ratio of live births to the total population in a given year. It's usually expressed as the number of live births per 1,000 people. The figure has remained below the 800,000 mark since the year 2022. Japan's population, including foreign residents, fell by 831,872, with deaths outnumbering births. *—ANI*

Gold prices decline Rs 50; silver falls by Rs 300

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Gold prices declined Rs 50 to Rs 62,900 per 10g in the national capital on Wednesday amid weak trends in international markets, according to HDFC Securities. The precious metal had closed at Rs 62,950 per 10 g on Tuesday. Silver prices also fellRs 300 to Rs 73,900 per kilogram. In the previous trade, silver had ended at Rs 74,200 per kg. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 62,900 per 10 grams, down by Rs 50 from the previous close," said Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities, HDFC Securities. In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading down at USD 2,029 per ounce from USD 2,034 per ounce in the previous trade. *—PTI*

Rupee falls 3 paise to settle at 82.92 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 28 FEB

The rupee declined by 3 paise to settle at 82.92 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday, tracking bearish equity markets and foreign fund outflow amid increased month-end demand for the American currency.Forex analysts said that softening crude oil prices provided a cushion to the Indian currency which was weighed down by a stronger dollar. Also, market participants were cautious ahead of the domestic GDP data to be released on Thursday and the US GDP numbers expected on Wednesday, they said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 82.90 and touched the intra-day low of 82.95 against the greenback.*—PTI*

Air India to operate 40% more flights next fiscal

MUMBAI, 28 FEB

Low-cost carrier Air India Express is looking to operate 40 per cent more flights next fiscal on the back of fleet expansion, sources said on Wednesday. At the same time, the airline will focus more on consolidating on the domestic routes and will not be adding many destinations, while the international network may see some marginal increase, said the sources aware of the developments. Air India Express currently operates 350 daily flights and has a fleet of 69 planes. It has some 1,300 pilots, including 400 of AirAsia India and another 400 on training. Express will commence flights to Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka during the forthcoming summer schedule, as per the sources.They also said that Air India Express will complete acquisition of its 50 white tail Boeing 737 Max plane order by December this year, of which it has already inducted 13-14 planes so far. Sources also say that the airline is expected to complete the merger of AirAsia India with it by the second quarter if the next fiscal. *—PTI*

Axis Bank introduces 'donation category' on BBPS

MUMBAI, 28 FEB

Axis Bank, one of the largest private sector banks announced the introduction of donation on Bharat Bill Payment System (BBPS). This makes Axis Bank the only BBPS Biller Operating Unit to enable trusts / charitable institutions to accept the contribution via any BBPS-enabled front ends. The facility is designed to change how donations are made, by making it more accessible, transparent, and convenient for people to support noble causes.With the introduction of the 'Donation Category' on BBPS, charitable institutions can collect offerings digitally in a seamless manner ensuring complete transparency and further deepen trust with donors/ devotees through this solution. By accepting the payment digitally, the charitable institutions are also able to lower the direct and indirect costs associated with

No. of ultra-rich in India rose by 6% last year to 13K: Report

The report claims they put 17% of invest-able wealth in luxury items

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

The number of ultra-high net worth individuals in India increased 6 per cent annually to 13,263 last year on rising prosperity and the number of affluents would grow further to reach nearly 20,000 by 2028, according to Knight Frank.

Ultra-high Net Worth Individuals (UHNWIs) are defined as individuals having a net worth of USD 30 million and above.

The ultra-rich allocated 17 per cent of their investable wealth towards luxury items, with maximum preference to watches followed by art and jewellery, said the report.

In a virtual press conference on Wednesday, real estate consultant Knight Frank India released 'The Wealth Report 2024' saying that the number of UHNWIs in India grew 6.1 per cent to 13,263 in 2023 as against 12,495 individuals in the previous year.

The number of UHNWIs is expected to expand to 19,908 by 2028 from 13,263 in 2023.

Knight Frank India Chairman and Managing Director ShishirBaijal said, "A surge in its UHNWI population, catapulting by 50.1 per cent within the next five years is an indication of this phenomenon."

As per Knight Frank's report, 90 per cent of Indian UHNWIs are expecting to witness an increase in their wealth during the year 2024. Almost 63 per cent are expecting to witness a significant increase of more than 10 per cent in their wealth value.

In the year 2023, the number of ultra-rich people globally rose by 4.2 per cent in 2023 to 6,26,619 ***PHOTO: X***

Globally, the number of wealthy individuals globally is estimated to increase by 28.1 per cent over the next five years to 8,02,891 by 2028, the consultant said. In the year 2023, the number of UHNWIs globally rose by 4.2 per cent in 2023 to 6,26,619 from 6,01,300 a year earlier. This increase has more than reversed the decline witnessed in 2022.

In terms of annual performances by various countries, Turkey leads Knight Frank's rankings with a 9.7 per cent YoY expansion in UHNWI numbers followed by the US 7.9 per cent, India 6.1 per cent, South Korea 5.6 per cent, and Switzerland 5.2 per cent. Outside Asia, strong growth is focused on the Middle East, Australasia, and North America, with Europe lagging and Africa and Latin America likely to be the weakest regions. *—PTI*

- The number of ultra-high net worth individuals in India increased 6 per cent annually to 13,263 last year on rising prosperity and the number of affluents would grow further to reach nearly 20,000 by 2028

SENSEX FALLS BY 790.34 PTS

Nifty slumped 247.20 points or 1.11 per cent to settle at 21,951.15 ***PHOTO: PTI***

Markets tumble 1% due to selling in Reliance stocks

MUMBAI, 28 FEB

Benchmark Sensex tanked more than 1 per cent while Nifty declined below the 22,000 level on Wednesday due to selling in index heavyweight Reliance Industries and bank stocks amid weak global market trends.

The 30-share BSE Sensex fell by 790.34 points or 1.08 per cent to settle at 72,304.88 with 26 of its constituents ending in the red and four in the green.

During the day, it tanked 872.93 points or 1.19 per cent to a low of 72,222.29. The Nifty slumped 247.20 points or 1.11 per cent to settle at 21,951.15. As many as 46 Nifty shares closed with losses while four advanced.

Among the Sensex firms, Power Grid fell the most by 4.43 per cent due to profit booking by investors. Reliance Industries dropped around 2 per cent, contributing 185.59 points to the slide.

IndusInd Bank, Maruti, Wipro, Tata Steel, JSW Steel, Asian Paints, Mahindra & Mahindra and UltraTech Cement were the biggest laggards. Hindustan Unilever, Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services and Bharti Airtel were the gainers.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge declined by 1.94 per cent and midcap index went lower by 1.82 per cent. All the indices ended lower. Utilities fell by 2.82 per cent, oil & gas declined 2.19 per cent, realty tanked 2.12 per cent, telecommunication dipped 1.92 per cent, services (1.89 per cent) and commodities (1.85 per cent).

A total of 2,963 stocks declined while 881 advanced and 77 remained unchanged. In Asian markets, Seoul settled with gains while Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. *—PTI*

BILL GATES ON INDIA TOUR

Microsoft Co-Founder Bill Gates visited a slum in Odisha's Bhubaneswar and interacted with the residents, members of women's self-help groups on Wednesday. He also visited the Microsoft India Development Center (IDC) in Hyderabad ***PHOTO: ANI***

Multiplexes' revenue growth dips amid OTT competition

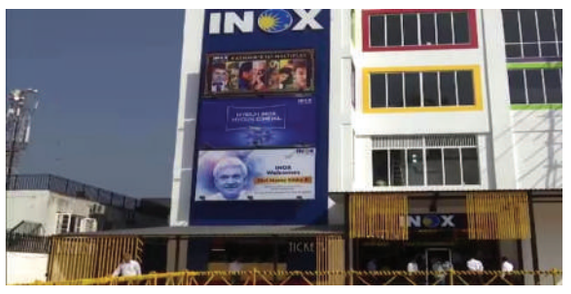
MUMBAI, 28 FEB

Revenue growth for multiplexes will slow down to 10-15 per cent in FY25 from the 20-24 per cent expected in FY24, a domestic ratings agency said on Wednesday.

The profit margins will widen marginally, but will continue to be lower than the pre-pandemic levels due to the competition faced by the industry from over the top service providers like Netflix and Amazon Prime, the report by Crisil Ratings said.

The topline will grow 10-15 per cent to Rs 7,300 crore in FY25, it estimated, adding that in FY24, the revenue growth was higher due to a slew of big-budget releases, especially from Hindi films like Gadar 2 and Jawan, it said.

The operating profit will grow by 4 percentage points to 14 per cent in FY24 on the rising revenues, and will widen further to 15 per cent in FY25, the agency said.



The profit margins will widen marginally, but will continue to be lower than the pre-pandemic levels ***PHOTO: REUTERS***

"But that number (margins) will still be lower than the pre-pandemic level of 18-20 per cent, given the competition from Over-The-Top (OTT) content," the report said.

The agency said OTT continues to benefit from high-quality and diverse content available on-tap and the competition from such platforms will keep occupancies below the pre-pandemic level going forward as well. Occupancy surged to 25 per cent in FY23 from 16 per cent in FY22, but remained below the pre-pandemic level of 30 per cent in FY20 amid. *—PTI*

Paytm shares fall 5%; hit lower circuit limit

NODIA, 28 FEB

Shares of One97 Communications Ltd, the owner of the Paytm brand, fell 5 per cent to hit a lower circuit limit in the late morning trade on Wednesday.

The stock declined 4.99 per cent to Rs 406.15 -- its lower circuit limit -- on the BSE. It fell 4.99 per cent to hit the lower circuit limit of Rs 406.20 on the NSE.

Shares of One97 Communications had hit upper circuit limits on Tuesday, Monday, and Friday. Vijay Shekhar Sharma has stepped down as part-time non-executive chairman of Paytm Payments Bank Limited and the board of the bank has been reconstituted, a filing said on Monday, adding that PPBL will commence the process of appointing a new chairman. The dramatic turn of events assumes significance in the backdrop of RBI's crackdown on Paytm Payments Bank. *—PTI*

SEBI MULLS RELAXING FRAMEWORK FOR CERTAIN FPIs

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Capital markets regulator Sebi on Wednesday proposed relaxing rules for certain Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) from enhanced disclosure requirements in a bid to promote ease of doing business.

In its consultation paper, the regulator suggested exempting category I university funds and university-related endowments FPI that meet specific criteria from enhanced disclosure requirements.

Additionally, it proposed exempting funds with concentrated holdings in entities without a promoter group, where there is no risk of breaching Minimum Public Shareholding (MPS) requirements, from enhanced reporting obligations.

Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has sought comments till March 8 from the public on the proposals. This came after Sebi, in August last year, mandated FPIs to disclose detailed information about entities holding any ownership, economic interest, or control in them, without any threshold. *—PTI*

WTO ignores service trade issues despite it representing 20% share

ABU DHABI, 28 FEB

Trade in services such as movement of skilled professionals accounts for over 20 per cent of the global commerce but the sector is still not getting sufficient attention in the negotiations of the WTO, according to experts and officials.

The experts also said that developed or rich member nations of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are only interested in pushing their own non-trade agenda and not focusing on issues which really need special focus of the Geneva-based multi-lateral body.

Trade ministers and officials of the 166-member WTO are gathered here to discuss wide ranging issues such as agriculture, and fisheries subsidies.

The 13th ministerial conference (MC13) of the WTO on Wednesday entered the third day. MC is the highest decision making body of the global trade watchdog.

Trade ministers and officials of the 166-member WTO are gathered here to discuss wide ranging issues ***PHOTO: REUTERS***

"There are enough issues related to trade are there to discuss in the WTO like sanitary and phytosanitary issues, technical barriers to trade and mutual recognition agreements (MRAs), but the developed nations want to push new issues," an international trade expert, who did not wish to be named, said.

Sharing similar views, an official said that there are no discussions on services trade in terms of how this can be improved.

"They are not discussing the issues which are restrictive for the developing nations," the official said.

Another expert said that issues like the movement of care-givers from emerging nations to rich nations needs attention as countries like India have demographic dividend for another 25 years and the EU has demographic deficit.

Economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said that services trade account for over 20 per cent of the world trade and despite that it is mired in non-transparent domestic regulations that impede the cross-border trade. *—PTI*

TO REDUCE GREENHOUSE GAS

Airtel switches to recycled PVC SIMs

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Telcom major BhartiAirtel on Wednesday said it has partnered with technology solutions provider IDEMIA Secure Transactions to switch from using virgin plastic SIM cards to recycled PVC SIM cards.

This makes Airtel the only telecommunications company to switch to recycled plastic SIM cards. "With this migration, the generation of over 165 tonnes of virgin plastic will be limited, which will further reduce the generation of over 690 tonnes of CO_2 equivalent in one year," the company said. Airtel has committed to reducing absolute scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across its operations by 50.2 per cent by FY31, the company added. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Vodafone shares tumble 10%; hit lower circuit limit

MUMBAI, 28 FEB

Shares of debt-laden Vodafone Idea Ltd on Wednesday plummeted 10 per cent after the fundraising announcement by the company failed to lift investors' sentiment.

The stock plunged 9.95 per cent to Rs 14.29 -- its lower circuit limit -- on the BSE. It fell by 9.77 per cent to Rs 14.30 -- its lower circuit limit-- on the NSE. Struggling telecom firm Vodafone Idea on Tuesday said its board has approved raising up to Rs 20,000 crore in equity from promoters and other investors by June as it looks to shore up finances for much delayed 5G rollout and strengthening 4G services. The debt-laden firm, where the government also holds just over 33 per cent equity stake, plans to raise Rs 45,000 crore through a mix of equity and debt with hopes of matching services offered by rivals Jio and BhartiAirtel that could arrest subscriber churn. The fundraising, when it happens, will also arm Vodafone Idea with firepower to improve competitive positioning in the Indian telecom market, where it trails larger rivals Reliance Jio and BhartiAirtel, by a wide margin. Vodafone Idea has been fighting a desperate battle for survival -- it has a debt of Rs 2.1 lakh crore, is reporting quarterly losses, and is haemorrhaging subscribers month after month. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

TO FOCUS ON AI

Apple unplugs self-driving electric car project

SACRAMENTO, 28 FEB

Apple has reportedly cancelled its plans to build electric vehicles (EV) a decade after the iPhone maker was rumoured to be working on the project.

The firm has never publicly acknowledged the project, which involves around two thousand people.

Many employees from the project will be moved to the iPhone maker's artificial intelligence (AI) division.

Apple did not immediately respond to a BBC request for a comment.

The Apple car team was reportedly known as the Special Projects Group as part of its chief executive Tim Cook's Project Titan.

As it spent billions of dollars on research and development, the company was initially rumoured to be working on a fully autonomous vehicle without a steering wheel and pedals.

The team was understood to still be years away from producing a vehicle.

"This is a smart and long awaited decision," Ray Wang, founder and chief executive of Silicon Valley-based consultancy Constellation Research told the BBC.

Apple has been exploring other opportunities beyond the iPhone and computers ***PHOTO: X***

"The market demand for EVs is not there and AI is where all the action is," he added.

Apple has been exploring other opportunities beyond the iPhone and computers, including its recently launched Vision Pro virtual reality headset.

Research firm Counterpoint highlighted that the decision came as the market for AI in consumer electronics is growing sharply. *—BBC News*

Skoda Auto plans to enter EV segment in India

PUNE, 28 FEB

Czech carmaker Skoda Auto plans to enter the mass market of electric vehicles segment in India, for which it is exploring all options, including partnerships with local companies for economies of scale, company's management board member Martin Jahn said on Wednesday.

The company is gearing up to enter the electric vehicles segment in India this year and is currently testing its premium electric SUV Enyaq.

PHOTO: X

"We are exploring all the options. I am not at liberty to give you any details on this because no decision has been made. We are looking at everything we want to bring volume electric car to India," Jahn, who is the member of the Board of Management for Sales and Marketing Skoda Auto, said here in an interaction. *—PTI*

Rahul is still feeling sore while batting in the nets

Rahul has now traveled to London to get an expert opinion on his injury

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Senior India batter K L Rahul is unlikely to feature in the fifth and final Test against England in Dharamsala as he continues to feel sore in his right quadriceps.

Rahul became unavailable after the series opener in Hyderabad in January but as per BCCI, he was 90 percent fit before the third Test in Rajkot earlier this month.

Rahul has now traveled to London to get an expert opinion on his injury and with the series in the bag, the Indian team management will not take the risk of playing him in the Dharamsala Test beginning 7 March.

He needs to be fully fit before the IPL where he will lead Lucknow Super Giants and is expected to bat in the middle order to bolster his chances of making the India squad for the T20 World Cup in the USA and the Caribbean.

Senior India batter K L Rahul is unlikely to feature in the fifth and final Test against England in Dharamsala **PHOTO: PTI**

"It is more to get an expert opinion (travel to London). He experiences a bit of pain (right quadriceps) while batting. It is to ensure that he recovers fully as he is a player that the team needs long-term.

"There is so much competition coming his way IPL, he could also be in the T20 World Cup mix. Then we have some important Test series against New Zealand, and Australia later in the year. So, it is better to give him time to recover properly than rushing him," an IPL source told PTI.

It is the same quadriceps injury that had sidelined Rahul for almost four months last year.

Having got injured during the IPL, Rahul returned to action with the Asia Cup in September and made an instant impact. In the more recent Test tour of South Africa, Rahul was the only century-maker from India in the drawn series.

His absence from the final Test means Rajat Patidar will remain with the squad but the MP batter can't be sure of his place in the playing eleven, having aggregated only 63 runs in six innings.

There is a possibility that Patidar will make a way for Devdutt Padikkal in Dharamsala. —*PTI*

Luton Town's Dutch goalkeeper #23 Tim Krull (left) stops the ball shot by Manchester City's Norwegian striker #09 Erling Haaland (center) during the English FA Cup fifth round football match between Luton Town and Manchester City at Kenilworth Road stadium in Luton **PHOTO: AFP**

Haaland hammers five as Man City thrash Luton

FA CUP

Luton, 28 FEB

Erling Haaland roared back to his best form with a five-goal salvo as Manchester City thumped Luton Town 6-2 at Kenilworth Road to reach the quarterfinals of the FA Cup on Tuesday.

Luton had no answer to the marauding Norwegian who bagged his eighth City hat-trick before halftime and then scored twice more after the break to kill off a stirring Luton revival.

The 23-year-old Haaland's first four goals were all created by Kevin De Bruyne. Mateo Kovacic also got on the scoresheet for holders City who are unbeaten in 18 games in all competitions.

Luton did threaten an unlikely comeback when Jordan Clark found the top corner with a sublime effort on the stroke of half-time and netted again early in the second half to make it 3-2. But a strong City side instantly found another gear to cruise into the hat for the last eight.

Haaland became the first top-flight player to score five goals in an FA Cup tie since George Best struck six for Manchester United against Northampton Town in 1970.

The only blemish for City, who faces Manchester United in the Premier League on Sunday, was an injury to Jack Grealish who was forced off in the opening period.

Haaland had scored only five goals in his previous 11 appearances for City -- a spell interrupted by a foot injury that some suggested had taken the edge off his game.

But he answered any doubters emphatically with a sensational display of center-forward play.

City meant business from the start and went ahead in the fourth minute as Matheus Nunes played in De Bruyne who cut back a perfect pass for Haaland to fire past Tim Krul. —*AP*

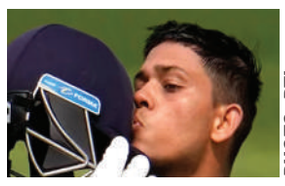


PHOTO: PTI

Jaiswal rises to 12th, Jurel to 69th in ICC Test rankings

DUBAI, 28 FEB

India's latest batting sensation Yashasvi Jaiswal advanced towards a top-10 spot in the ICC rankings for Test batters by climbing three spots to 12th while his compatriot Dhruv Jurel leapfrogged 31 places to 69th on Wednesday. Jaiswal, who started the series in 69th position, continues his ascent to the top after scores of 73 and 37 in the fourth match of India's ICC World Test Championship series against England in Ranchi. Player of the Match Jurel's scores of 90 and 39 has jumped a whopping 31 places while former England captain Root is back in the top three.—*PTI*

PHOTO: AFP

Ravindra in for NZ ahead of 1st test against Australia

WELLINGTON, 28 FEB

Devon Conway has been ruled out but Rachin Ravindra has been cleared to play for New Zealand in the first cricket test against Australia starting at the Basin Reserve on Thursday. Conway suffered a thumb injury while keeping wicket in the second Twenty20 international between the teams on Friday last week. While initial scans suggested there was no fracture, additional tests in Wellington in recent days have found there is damage to Conway's left thumb.Conway will have further tests later in the week. Meantime, Will Young opened the batting with Tom Latham in Conway's place.—*AP*

Mexican Open: Altmaier stuns Zverev

ACAPULCO, 28 FEB

Daniel Altmaier pulled off a major upset on Tuesday, beating top-seeded Alexander Zverev in a battle of German players to qualify for the second round of the Mexican Open.The 27-year-old Altmaier and the world's 57th-ranked player defeated his countryman for the first time in three tries in 2:26 hours and will play Miomir Kecmanovic next. Zverev, sixth in the ATP rankings, lost a seven-match winning streak against German players. His previous loss against one was in 2019.—*AP*

UP Warriors take down mighty MI

BENGALURU, 28 FEB

UP Warriors pulled off a massive heist after beating defending champions Mumbai Indians (MI) by 7 wickets in Match No.6 of the Women's Premier League (WPL) 2024 on Wednesday, February 28 at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore.

Vrinda Dinesh, who did not have great outings against the Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) and Delhi Capitals (DC), injured her shoulder while fielding and hence did not come out to bat. The Warriors picked Kiran Navgire as Alyssa Healy's opening partner, and it turned out to be a masterstroke.

It was an amazing target set by the batters of Mumbai but they would have expected a little bit more from themselves. However, they tried their utmost to stretch the scoreline more but failed to do so. UP's bowling unit was able to gain control at the later half of the inning, But it's all up to their batter to chase the score down. —*PTI*

Kiran Navgire **PHOTO: PTI**

India's R Praggnanandhaa grinds down German Vincent Keymer in the first round **PHOTO: AFP**

Praggu crushes Keymer in the opener

PRAGUE, 28 FEB

India'sR Praggnanandhaa came up with a scintillating performance to grind down German Vincent Keymer in the first round of the Prague Masters Chess tournament that got underway here on Wednesday.

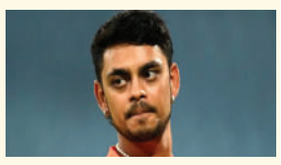
With this win, Praggnanandhaa also added some more spice to the tale around the highest-rated Indian as he again overtook Viswanathan Anand in live rating to clinch the top spot in the country.

Nodirbek Abdusattar of Uzbekistan defeated Nguyen Thai Dai Van of the Czech Republic while Parham Maghsoodloo of Iran was the other player to score a full point at the expense of Bartel Mateusz of Poland. In other games of the day, D Gukesh had a chance to fight for more but had to settle for a draw with Richard Rapport of Romania, and Vidit Gujrathi split the point with David Navara of the Czech Republic. —*AP*

Kishan, Iyer dropped from BCCI central contracts

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer were on Wednesday excluded from the BCCI central contracts after ignoring the board's directive to play in the Ranji Trophy. India skipper Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah, and Ravindra Jadeja figured in the A plus category, the highest bracket of the BCCI's central contract.Six cricketers feature in the A category including R Ashwin, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, KL Rahul, Shubman Gill, and Hardik Pandya.Suryakumar Yadav, Rishabh Pant, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel, and Yashasvi Jaiswal have got B category contracts. As many as 15 athletes have been handed C-category contracts including Rinku Singh, Tilak Verma, Ruturaj Gaekwad, Shardul Thakur, Shivam Dube, Ravi Bishnoi, Jitesh Sharma, Washington Sundar, Mukesh Kumar, Sanju Samson, Arshdeep Singh, KS Bharat, Prasidh Krishna, Avesh Khan and Rajat Patidar."Please note that Shreyas Iyer and Ishan Kishan were not considered for the annual contracts in this round of recommendations," said the BCCI in a statement.The selection committee has also recommended fast bowling contracts for Akash Deep, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Umran Malik, Yash Dayal, and Vidwath Kaverappa."The BCCI has recommended that all athletes give precedence to participating in domestic cricket during periods when they are not representing the national team," the statement added. —*PTI*



Ishan Kishan **PHOTO: PTI**

Shreyas Iyer **PHOTO: PTI**

Mallorca beats Real Sociedad on penalties

COPA DEL REY FINAL

KIRTIPUR, 27 FEB

The Spanish club partly owned by Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr and former NBA great Steve Nash defeated Real Sociedad 5-4 in a penalty shootout on Tuesday to make it to the final 21 years after it won the competition for the only time.

Mallorca goalkeeper Dominik Greif saved the opening penalty by Mikel Oyarzabal, and then Sergi Darder converted the decisive kick to put Mallorca in the final. The teams drew 1-1 in regulation and were scoreless in extra time at Sociedad's Reale Arena.

The teams had drawn 0-0 in the first leg in Mallorca on Feb. 6.

Mallorca will play the April 6 final in Seville against either Atletico Madrid or Athletic Bilbao, which will play the second leg of the other semifinal on Thursday in Bilbao. Athletic won the first leg 1-0 in Madrid.

RCD Mallorca's Dominik Greif and Sergi Darder celebrate after winning the penalty shoot-out. **PHOTO: AFP**

It will be the fourth Copa final for Mallorca, which hadn't made it to the title game since it won the tournament in 2003 against Recreativo Huelva. Its other final appearances were in 1991 and 1998. It hadn't made it to the semifinals since 2009.

Mallorca's Mexican coach Javier Aguirre had taken Osasuna to the 2005 final when it lost to Real Betis.

Sociedad was trying to return to the Copa final for the first time since it beat rival Athletic to lift the trophy in the 2019-20 season.

Vedat Muriqi, Manu Morlanes, Omar Mascarell, and Nemanja Radonjic also scored for Mallorca in the penalty shootout. Beñat Turrientes, Jon Ander Olasagasti, Martín Zubimendi and Sheraldo Becker scored for Sociedad. —*AP*

Murray seeking another shot at gold in Paris Olympics

NEW DELHI, 27 FEB

Andy Murray hopes to challenge for a third Olympic gold medal in Paris this year despite a run of poor form and hints that he could soon call time on his illustrious career.

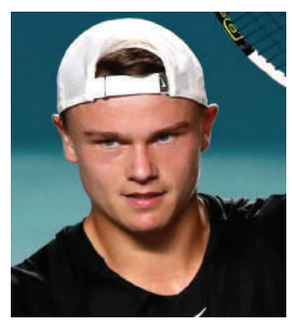
The 36-year-old British player, the only man ever to win two Olympic singles titles, has struggled for victories in recent months and is currently ranked 67th in the world.

Until a victory against Alexandre Muller in Doha this month, Murray had been on a six-match losing streak, and this week appeared to suggest he was in the final months of his career."Hopefully, I can get the chance to compete at another one," Murray told BBC Radio Four's Today program on Wednesday when asked whether he would be present at the Paris Olympics.

Three-time Grand Slam champion Murray won singles golds in London in 2012 and in Rio de Janeiro four years later but could be in danger of missing out on qualification for the singles in Paris if his ranking continues to slide.

Murray's immediate target will be finding some form for Wimbledon, which many have suggested might be the logical place for him to bring the curtain down on his career."When the time is right, I will probably say something before I play my last match and my last tournament," he said.

Andy Murray **PHOTO: AFP**



Holger Rune **PHOTO: AFP**

Mexican Open: Rune eases past American Michael MmohSecond-seeded Holger Rune eased past American Michael Mmoh 6-2, 6-3 on Tuesday and advanced to the second round of the Mexican Open.

Rune, ranked seventh in the ATP, needed 92 minutes to dispatch Mmoh, who made his way into the main draw through the qualification tournament.The 20-year-old Rune, from Denmark, reached the semifinals in Acapulco last year.

He advanced to face the winner of the late match between Aleksandar Kovasevic and Jordan Thompson.Daniel Altmaier pulled off a major upset, beating top-seeded Alexander Zverev in a battle of German players to qualify for the second round.

—*AP*

DUBAI TENNIS C'SHIP

Bopanna-Ebden, Yuki-Haase pairs advance, Nagal exits

DUBAI, 28 FEB

Top seeds Rohan Bopanna and his Australian partner Matthew Ebden entered the men's doubles quarterfinals of the Dubai Duty-Free Tennis Championships with a straight-set win over the Tunisian-Pakistani pair of Skander Mansouri and Aisam-Ul-Haq Qureshi here.

Bopanna and Ebden, who won the Australian Open last month, took one hour and 41 minutes to get the better of Mansouri and Qureshi 7-6(4) 7-6(5) in the round of 16 on Tuesday night.

Top seeds Rohan Bopanna and his Australian partner Matthew Ebden **PHOTO: AFP**

Bopanna and Ebden, who made their first outing since winning the men's doubles title at the Australian Open, will face Ariel Behar of Uruguay and Czech Adam Pavlasek in the quarterfinals.

Another Indian, Yuki Bhambri, and his Dutch partner Robin Haase also progressed to the quarterfinals, defeating Kazakhstan's Alexander Bublik and Adrian Mannarino of France 6-7(6) 6-3 10-8 in a round of 16 match.

Yuki and Haase will next face the winner of the match between the Belgian duo of Sander Gille and Joran Vliegen and third seed English-Kiwi pair of Jamal Murray and Michael Venus.

However, it was curtains for India in men's singles after the country's top player Sumit Nagal exited in the round of 32.

Nagal lost 4-6 7-5 1-6 against Italy's Lorenzo Sonego.

—*AP*

Sumit Nagal **PHOTO: PTI**

Hockey India denies any rift within the organization

NEW DELHI, 28 FEB

Dilip Tirkey **PHOTO: PTI**

Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey and secretary general Bhola Nath Singh on Wednesday denied outgoing CEO Elena Norman's assertion of a rift between them, asserting that they are "united" and working in the best interest of the sport.Norman resigned on Tuesday and in an interview with PTI she alleged that there was factionalism in the body. The 49-year-old Australian suggested that Tirkey and Singh were at loggerheads and also complained of a difficult work environment.In a joint statement, Tirkey and Singh rejected Norman's claims."Recently there have been statements by outgoing officials published in the media. —*PTI*